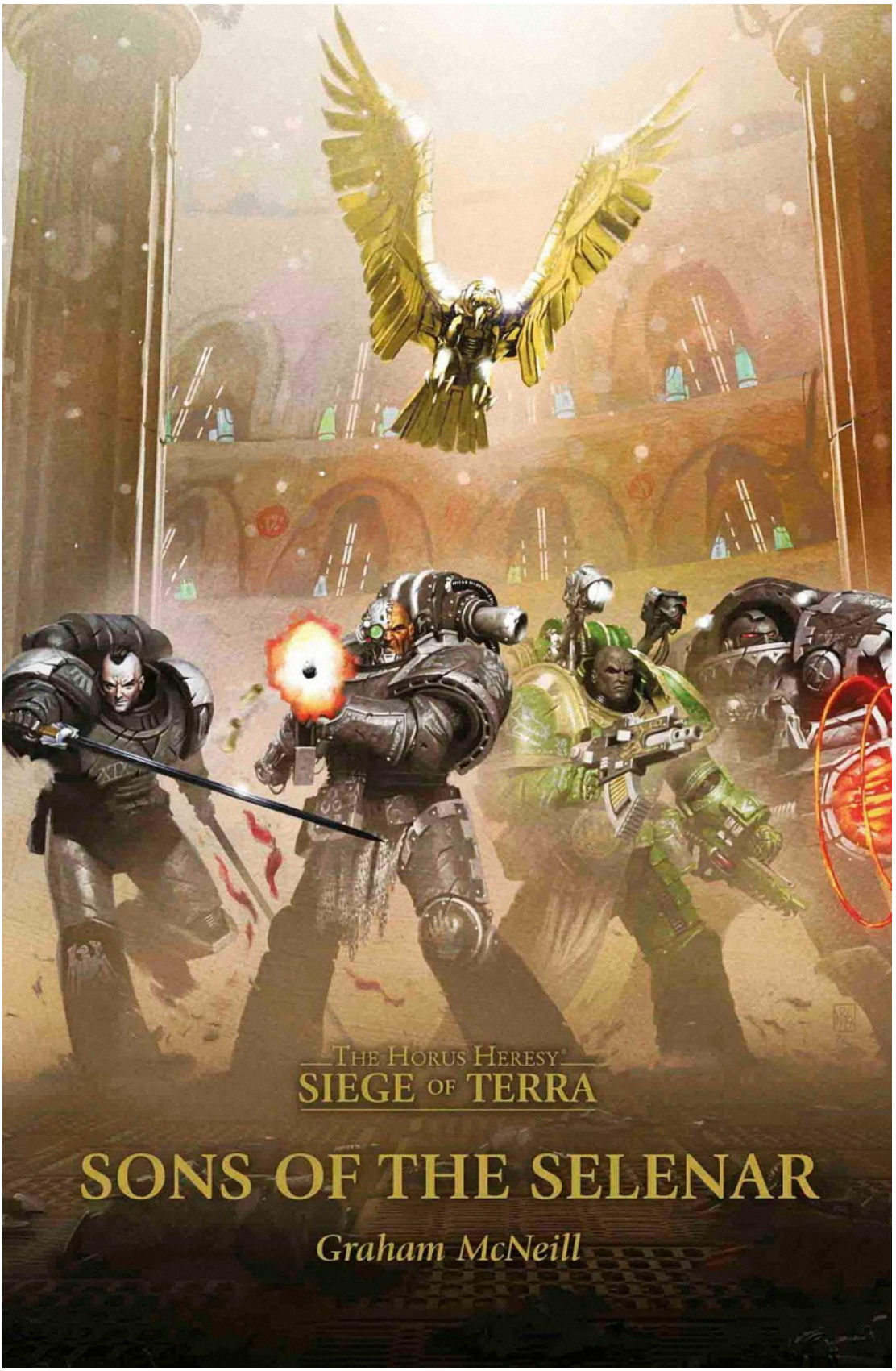
Sons of the Selenar

Graham McNeill

THE HORUS HERESY

SIEGE OF TERRA

Loyalist, traitor...?
The distinction is irrelevant.
They are all sons of the Selenar.


THE HORUS HERESY
SIEGE OF TERRA
SONS OF THE SELENAR
Graham McNeill

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THE HORUS HERESY

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THE HORUS HERESY®

SIEGE OF TERRA

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow.

Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The end is here. The skies darken, colossal armies gather. For the fate of the Throneworld, for the fate of mankind itself...

The Siege of Terra has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Sisypheum

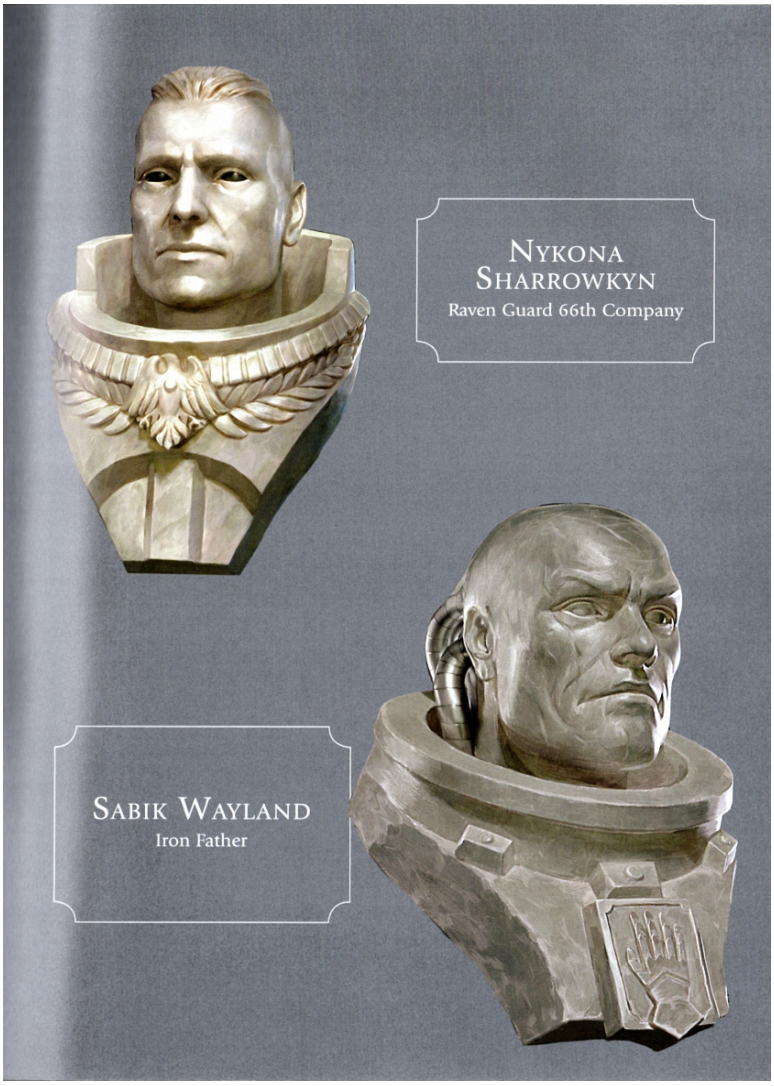
ULRACH BRANTHAN, Captain, Iron Hands 65th Clan-Company
CADMUS TYRO, Acting captain of the *Sisypheum*
FRATER THAMATICA, Ironwrought, Avernii veteran
IGNATIUS NUMEN, Battle-brother
SABIK WAYLAND, Iron Father
GARUDA, Eagle construct of Ulrach Branthan
NYKONA SHARROWKYN, Raven Guard 66th Company
ATESH TARSA, Apothecary, Salamanders 24th Company

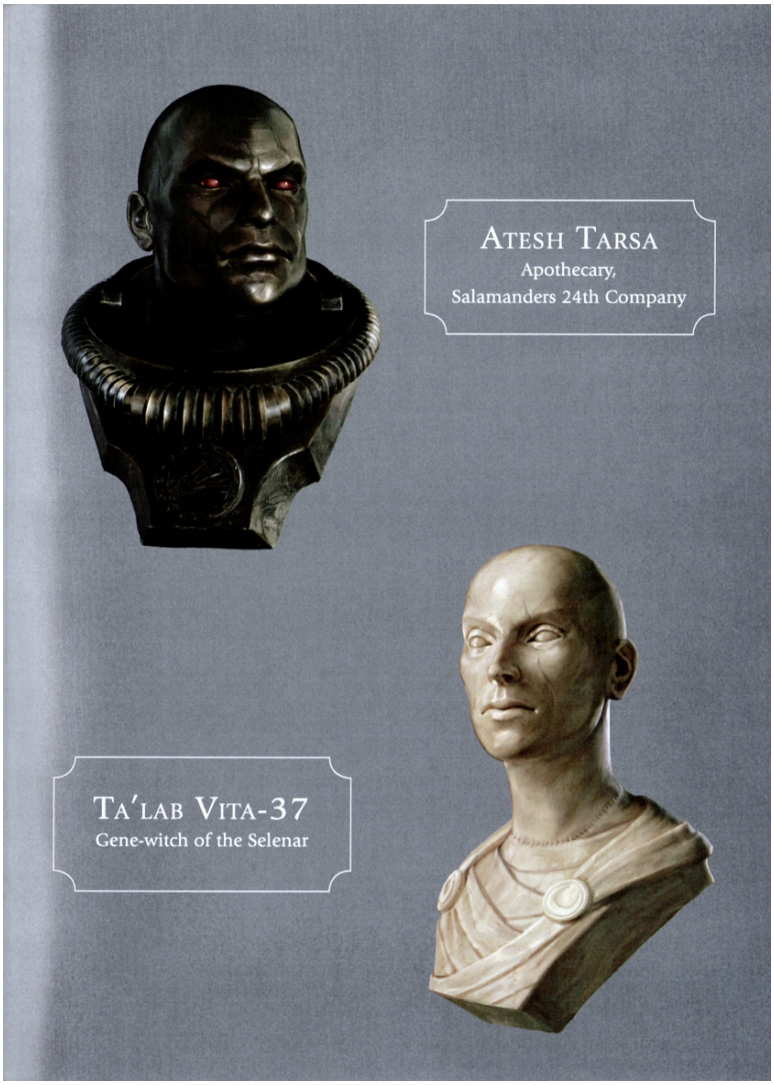
The Selenar

HELIOSA-54, High Matriarch of Luna's Selenar cults
TA'LAB VITA-37, Gene-witch of the Selenar

The Sons of Horus

TRASTEVERE, Justaerin, captain of the Eye's Watch
VORNAK, Justaerin Terminator
URGAVE, Justaerin Terminator


Nykona Sharrowkyn
Raven Guard 66th Company
Sabik Wayland
Iron Father


Atesh Tarsa
Apothecary,
Salamanders 24th Company
Ta'lab Vita-37
Gene-witch of the Selenar

'I, for one, know of no sweeter sight for a man's eyes than his own country...'

- Omerus, the Blind Bard of Ionia

'A leader is ultimately responsible for everything.'

- The Primarch Guilliman

'Loyalist, traitor...? The distinction is irrelevant. They are all sons of the Selenar.'

- Ta'lab Vita-37

PROLOGUE

Do not swear by the moon,
for she changes constantly.

The surface of Terra was burning.

Its atmosphere glowed with the fires of Unity.

Storms of global war raged beneath toxic skies, like the banked embers of a hearth.

They bathed the Lunar surface in red.

Warfare had riven humanity's birthrock for as long as the Selenar could remember, the conflicts growing in scale with every passing epoch and each unchecked evolution of technology.

'War has recast the world in its image,' said Heliosa-54, the ruddy light of Terra's unification reflecting from the moulded surfaces of her chromium mask.

'It has always been thus, revered matriarch,' spat Ta'lab Vita-37, her multi-armed form hunched over the data-light of the command console. 'It is mankind's nature to destroy.'

The matriarch of the Selenar turned to her most trusted gene maiden, hearing the stress placed on the *man* of mankind.

'That is likely true,' agreed Heliosa-54, 'but we too are a branch of that shared root. Yes, we distil the essences of singular genetic paths in search of the perfect aspects of our species, but follow the strands of history far enough back, and we are not so different.'

She felt Ta'lab Vita-37's urge to challenge that assertion, her consciously evolved nature as a contrarian and questioner warring with her respect for Heliosa-54's vaunted archetype.

'You disagree?'

'I would not presume to, revered matriarch. Not now.'

'Of course you would, it is the archetype you iterate upon with every evolution. Speak freely.'

'Very well, revered matriarch,' said Ta'lab Vita-37, pausing to gesture towards the grim situation unfolding in front of them. 'The Emperor's transhuman warriors are bred to wreak bloody ruin and nothing else. They are capable of nothing else. But we of the Selenar cults, by iterating upon the twin mysteries of the helix, perform acts of delation and creation. The gene-wrights of the Emperor pursue only the science of death, and it is too late for them to change their course.'

'And our sciences? Do we not also craft killing engines of steel and flesh?'

'For the defence of our fiefdoms, yes,' Ta'lab Vita-37 conceded. 'But the Dianic rites bring us closer to the true potential of humanity. Ultimately they will move us *further* from the urge to destroy.

'I hope that will one day prove to be the case,' said Heliosa-54. 'But do not be so quick to condemn our Terran brothers. In times past, there were moments when the better angels of human nature sought to turn our species from the bloody altars of war. To embrace Peace.'

'Such times were few and far between,' pointed out la lab Vita-37. 'And they never lasted.'

As if to reinforce her point, the curve-walled chamber at the heart of the moon shook with the impact of nearby detonations. Grey dust spilled from cracks in the ceiling. It danced in the suspensor fields surrounding Heliosa-54's floating, cursive-spined form. Fractal patterns of dust glittered in the actinic light thrown out by the gently spinning gene-looms woven into the stone walls.

The pneuma-tubes along Heliosa-54's neck pulsed in time with her frosted breath, crafting a twisting helix at her throat.

'Why does the Emperor seek to destroy us?' asked Ta'lab Vita-37.

'The Emperor does not seek to destroy us.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 extended a curved, talon-like fingertip, hooking a disc of noospheric light from the gloss-black of the command console and lifting it up between them.

A rapidly shrinking noose of red light converged on their location, a silver icon of the crescent moon. Previously muted vox-channels surged with screams of the doomed and dying. The unmistakable bangs of bolter

fire and shrieking plasma explosions formed a deafening cacophony of slaughter.

'All available data suggests otherwise,' she said. 'Warriors of the Seventh and Sixteenth Legions are slaughtering everything in their path. Our cults are dying as we speak.'

The howls of their attackers were a screeching din that scraped the spine, feral war-shouts of men born in the dark and raised on murder. Such men would accept nothing less than the complete destruction of whoever dared stand before them.

'The Emperor does not seek to destroy us,' repeated Heliosa-54. 'He seeks to yoke us to His great work. Not without some justification, He hopes we fear annihilation more than servitude. His hubris requires our science, our looms and our mysteries. He knows much, but He does not know everything.'

'Is that why you brought me here?' asked Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Is that why you still remain?'

'Yes. If the Emperor's killers do not find me here, they will tear Luna apart until they do. They will break me and I will be forced to give them the Magna Mater.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 flinched at the thought, and said, 'What is it you require of me?'

Heliosa-54 extended a dextrous, needle-like hand, one whose fingertips had crafted gene-sequences of such dizzying complexity that it seemed inconceivable they did not belong to some ancient creator goddess.

'To forsake me,' said Heliosa-54.

'I do not understand,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

Data flowed between them, coiling spirals of light bearing gene sequences, marker codes and swathes of information so complex it made Ta'lab Vita-37 gasp at the density of inload.

'Go below to the Ergodic Vault. Sever your connections to the Luna Manifold, take the Magna Mater and vanish. I cannot divulge what I do not know. Too few of the high priestesses remain alive to destroy the Magna Mater, so you must keep it from the Emperor, you understand?'

'I understand,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

Heliosa-54 saw Ta'lab Vita-37's shoulders slump, the gene-maiden already burdened by the terrible duty she had placed upon her.

'And if they should eventually find me?'

'Then pray that he who takes the Magna Mater is a wiser soul and has greater vision than Terra's new master.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 bowed, clasping her hands across her chest.

'It shall be as you say, revered matriarch,' she said. 'I will not fail you.'

Heliosa-54 did not watch her go, already beginning a mnemonic purge. Sadness touched her as precious memories burned away in the fires of synaptic erasure. She had loved Ta'lab Vita-37 as a daughter, but could not allow any trace of the gene-maiden to be found within her neural network.

She turned back to the console.

Barely six hours had passed since the sudden, shocking assault of the brute-crafted gene-warriors from Terra.

Every war front on Luna told the same story of defeat.

Her heart heavy with fear for the future, the High Matriarch of Luna opened a broad-spectrum vox-channel.

She knew the Emperor would hear her.

She hoped His warriors would.

'Call off your wolves,' she begged.

BOOK 1

MAIDEN

She is a wild, tangled forest with temples
and treasures concealed within.

1

A Captain Remade
Skeleton Crew
Carnager

How best should a warrior die?

He had given much thought to this over the years. As a neophyte, he imagined his end would come in a terrible war against some hideous xenoform, fighting side by side with his brothers for a noble and heroic cause. His last moments would come in a battle spoken of in awe by the warriors of ages yet to pass.

In the following millennia, lessons learned from his end would be taught in every academy of war - required reading for the youth of this new age.

Libraries of books would be written of that bloody time.

But war cares nothing for the arrogant imaginings of young men.

Its teachings are bloody and indifferent.

Yes, heroes are forged in the crucible of combat, and the legacies of a handful live on in the memories of those who endure. But tor every hero whose deeds transcend their death, tens of thousands more are forgotten or never known at all.

Their courage goes unrecorded.

Their stories are never told.

Nykona Sharrowkyn was no longer a neophyte, and ever since Sabik Wayland had dragged his ruined body from the betrayal on Isstvan V, he'd long known he would die in the dark, alone and unremembered.

A fitting end for a warrior of the Raven Guard.

How best should a warrior die?

In a little over two minutes, he'd likely find out.

Spots of light flickered like auspex glitches on the ochre orb of Jupiter, which filled the *Sisypheum's* viewscreen. But they weren't glitches, they were burning weapons platforms struck from their orbital anchors and now dragged to destruction by the vast planet's gravity. In the foreground, pyrochemical lightning and ash storms distorted the gun-metal ellipse of Ganymede as its vast hydro-stacks burned in the fury of traitor bombardments.

The Solar War was raging, hot and bright, but drawing inexorably closer to Terra from the outer-system planets. The Warmaster was tightening his noose, but every minute the loyalists kept the traitors from the Throneworld's glory was a victory.

Dying ships blazed in Jupiter's high orbit, skeletons of blackened metal alight from within. Atomic storms raged in their wakes as millions of megatons of ship-killing ordnance detonated like distant supernovas.

Not as distant as Nykona Sharrowkyn would have liked.

Swarms of torpedoes flew hot in the void. Macro shells lit up space in blinding explosions. Banks of lasers blinked in collimated lines of actinic brightness.

Something detonated off the ventral axis. Sharrowkyn had no idea what it might have been. A torpedo warhead? A ship exploding? A hunter-killer mine?

Three hundred and sixty-seven ships manoeuvred aggressively within the Jovian engagement volume. Escorts and destroyers mostly At least seventy vessels of capital displacement also Sharrowkyn had little skill in coordinating void fights or the operation of a starship, but after the disastrous mission to Lema Two-Twelve and the decimation of the *Sisypheum's* crew, he'd had to learn something of the craft.

A twisting shape emerged from the screeching static and waves of interference rippled through the holographic representation of the void brawl.

Huge, and coming right at them.

Range markers and ident-tags flickered to life.

'Tumbling Lunar-class dead ahead!' shouted Sharrowkyn.

'I see it,' replied Sabik Wayland, spliced into the *Sisypheum's* multiple helm controls via neuro-proxy devices crafted by Frater Thamatica. 'Manoeuvring now.'

Wayland sounded matter-of-fact, but Sharrowkyn had fought beside the warrior of the Iron Hands long enough to hear the strain beneath his outward calm.

The bridge deck tilted violently as the Iron Father threw the *Sisypheum* into a hard, rolling turn. The heavily modified strike cruiser shuddered. Its hull plates buckled and up-armoured bulkheads groaned in protest as the kilometres-long keel flexed.

Gravity shifted with the violence of the manoeuvre and proximity alarms brayed. The clashing, discordant shriek of intersecting void shields filled the bridge. Hardwired servitors maintaining shield integrity spasmed as electrical feedback burned them alive from within. Sharrowkyn gagged at the smell of scorched machine oil and flesh.

The unimaginable scale of the gutted Lunar-class vessel filled the viewscreen. Sharrowkyn felt himself ducking as its burning superstructure passed over them. So vast it felt like it would never end.

So close he felt he could reach the other ship's bridge in one powered leap.

'Didn't even come close,' said Wayland, pulling out of the turn and leaving the doomed ship in their wake as he angled them back to the battle.

'That warning was too damn late, Sharrowkyn!' bellowed Ulrach Branthan, the newly resurrected captain of the *Sisypheum*. His voice was a hideous amalgam of ruined human vocal cords and ad hoc augmetics. 'You're supposed to be tracking the flow of this battle.'

'Do I *look* like the master of surveyors?' snapped Sharrowkyn.

'Then step aside and find someone who can read a damn auspex!' said Branthan, his towering form stepping down from the command podium with a booming thud of asymmetrical, splay-clawed feet.

The captain's body was a nightmarish fusion of flesh and machine, but it bore only a passing resemblance to the honourable chassis of the Dreadnought from which its parts had been cannibalised. Rather, he was now a thing of biomechanical horror wrought by Atesh Tarsa in a moment of madness and desperation. The ancient relic known as the Heart of Iron was enmeshed in Branthan's exposed ribs and musculature like a chromium spider, beating with a loathsomeness Sharrowkyn could barely stomach.

The spoiled-meat stink of Branthan's body and the noxious chemicals keeping his rotten flesh alive reminded Sharrowkyn of his youth - of when he would find milky, bloated bodies afloat in the deep salt pools of Lycaeus.

A psyber-eagle wrought from pale steel and brass perched at his shoulder. The Iron Hands had named it Garuda, after an ancient Medusan myth, and, like the crew of the *Sisypheum*, it had suffered great hurts, but yet endured. On Iydris, it had taken a bolt-round from the swordsman Lucius, but Thamatica and Wayland had restored its mechanical life.

The surveyor station was awash with flickering ghost images of the absurdly close-range battle. Wayland rolled them around the shuddering wreck of the *Glory Hound*, a Mars-class warship burning from bow to stem.

Booming clangs echoed through the ship's superstructure. Repurposed maintenance servitors at damage control blurted screeds of binaric gibberish.

'What was that?' demanded Branthan.

'I don't know,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Suicidal bombers or fighter craft with no carrier to return to? Maybe drifting wreckage too small for the auspex to pick up.'

'Not good enough. Raven Guard!"

Sharrowkyn bit back an angry retort as the display flared with signal bloom. Threat warnings blazed to life across the glowing surface of the slate.

'Capital vessel coming about on our rearward quarter.' he called. 'Oberon-class, I think.'

'*The Covenant of Truth*. Seventeenth Legion predator-ship,' replied Wayland sharply. 'But it's not coming for us.'

Dozens of threat runes blinked to life on the viewscreen.

'How can you be sure?' barked Branthan.

'The Kryptos,' said Wayland, pulling the *Sisypheum* away from the larger vessel's void-wake. 'It's feeding me the *Covenant's* encrypted vox. Its captain is communicating with two other ships. They're moving to bracket the *Europa's Wrath*.'

Sharrowkyn tried to sort the conflicting auspex returns and match what he was seeing to what Wayland was telling him.

'Are you certain?' he asked, 'looks to me like the *Covenant* is manoeuvring for a raking barrage across our drive.'

'I don't like ships on my rear!' said Branthan. Garuda spread its wings and squawked angrily.

'It's *not* coming for us,' insisted Wayland.

'It has a perfect firing position,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Holding course.' said Wayland.

'Throne damn you, Sabik Wayland!' cried Branthan, pounding across the deck towards the Iron Father. For an instant, Sharrowkyn thought he was going to rip Wayland from helm control.

The range counters slowed and extended.

Sharrowkyn let out a breath. 'It's pulling away.'

'I told you, the *Covenant* is hungry to kill the *Europa's Wrath*'.

The viewscreen erupted with light as the *Covenant of Truth* launched staggered broadsides into its victim. Boxed in by the barrages of two other traitor warships, the Imperial vessel was forced to endure the punishing fire flaying its shields.

Torpedo boats and bomber wings flew in close to the *Europa's Wrath*, and wave upon wave of ordnance punched into the titanic warship's hull. Secondary boosters thrust warheads farther into the larger ship before delayed-action fuses detonated them deep in its vitals.

A rippling wave travelled the length of the vessel as explosions raced through its internal compartments, tearing it apart from the inside. Swirling conflagrations erupted from the *Wrath's* many wounds, burning white-hot with pure oxygen and the chemical fire of its blood. Sharrowkyn felt his heart clamped by an icy fist as he watched the majestic ship die. Like the last of a species finally brought to extinction, it fought to the end, but its doom was assured. The rad-wash of its murder fouled every sensor return, but Sharrowkyn saw rampant cascades of high-band atomics flaring deep in its enginarium

That could only mean one thing.

'She's going critical,' shouted Sharrowkyn, 'Get us clear, Wayland.

'Belay that!' ordered Branthan. 'Get us closer!'

'What?' shouted Sharrowkyn. 'No! You'll kill us all!'

He took a half-step towards Branthan

'Remain at your post!' barked the monstrous captain of the Iron Hands.

'Wayland, no!' shouted Sharrowkyn. 'It's suicide to be anywhere near that ship.'

'Bring us around,' said Branthan. *The Covenant of Truth's* shields are down. Vector a course directly towards its bridge. Sharrowkyn, get me a firing solution right now!'

'Wayland, get us out of here,' pleaded Sharrowkyn. 'He'll kill us all for the sake of vengeance.'

Branthan spun around, murderously swift for something so hulking. A powerful fist, ripped from the chassis of the fallen Brother Bombastus, slammed into Sharrowkyn's chest.

He flew backwards, twisting in the air to land in a crouched skid across the deck. Muscle memory made his hand fly to his hip, where his black-bladed gladius was sheathed.

He looked up to see Garuda perched on the edge of the auspex table, its head cocked to the side as it regarded him with its unblinking eyes.

Was it just his imagination or did the bird shake its head? Sharrowkyn let out a breath as Garuda took flight and returned to Branthan's shoulder. The deck shuddered as the *Sisypheum* fired its prow bombardment cannon at point-blank range. *The Covenant of Truth's* close-in defence systems had no lime to react, and the city-leveling ordnance impacted on its command deck with devastating effect.

An Oberon-class battleship was a monstrously powerful ship of the line, heavily armoured and bristling with weapons systems, but without shields it was vulnerable. The *Sisypheum's* shells punched deep into the nexus of its command centre, gouging mortal wounds into its brain. Plumes of fire and blossoming clouds of molten steel vented into space.

The *Sisypheum* flew through the expanding clouds of superheated vapour and cascades of wreckage, chased by a storm of hastily aimed las-fire and burst shells from anti-torpedo frag-launchers.

Branthan turned from Sharrowkyn, Garuda once again at his shoulder.

'Hard turn, bring us back around,' said Branthan. 'I want to finish this bastard off.'

'It's already out of the fight,' said Sharrowkyn.

'I don't want it *out of the fight*,' snapped Branthan. 'I want it *dead*'.'

The *Sisypheum* shuddered as Wayland put the ship into a tight corkscrewing turn to starboard. He angled the prow down to obscure their

course in the blazing plasma wake of the wounded battleship.

'Thamatica!' barked Wayland over the vox. 'I'm going to need those reactors burning hotter.'

The vox crackled with a blurt of angry binaric code before Thamatica answered from the enginarium.

'I assure you, Iron Father, it is taking everything I have simply to keep the reactors from overloading and killing us all. I can do only so much with barely a handful of menial servitors assisting me.'

'Do what you can, Ironwrought,' said Wayland, snapping off the vox. 'Nykona?'

Sharrowkyn didn't answer, his gaze fixed on Ulrach Branthan's back. He released the breath he'd been holding, feeling a sharp pain in his ribs. He relaxed his white-knuckled grip on his gladius, understanding that he had been on the verge of unleashing lethal violence on a fellow legionary.

An insane fellow legionary, yes, but one whose loyalty was still given to the Emperor.

'Nykona,' said Wayland, his voice calm but authoritative. 'I need eyes in this fight. Return to your station, brother.'

Sharrowkyn nodded slowly and sheathed his blade.

The void was burning with innumerable atomic flare-storms, pulsing tsunami of e-mag surges and the detonation echoes of the *Covenant's* magazine stores.

Situational awareness was next to impossible to determine.

Even an asupex-savant or an officer with decades of experience would likely divine nothing from this sensory anarchy.

'Coming about,' said Wayland matter-of-factly, as if announcing mundane orbital manoeuvres. 'Gun Deck, how long till the bombardment cannon is back online?'

The pained voice of Atesh Tarsa, the Salamanders Apothecary, echoed through the bridge.

'Numen's working on it, but it will be at least seven minutes before the weapon is ready to fire. Every part of the reload process has to be done manually.'

Wayland cut the link and said, 'Broadsides it is then.'

A discordant wailing cut over the vox-bands, and Sharrowkyn winced at the torment he heard in the nightmarish howls.

Part binaric code, part daemonic cant.

In its purest form, the Mechanicum called it scrapcode.

It was the Kryptos, screaming from its below-decks cell.

Not a warning, a shriek of terror...

'Brace, brace, brace!' yelled Wayland.

Sharrowkyn saw it a second later.

A tapered prow knifing through the void, vectoring in at the perfect kill angle, murder-torpedoes already loose, stabbing lasers stripping away the last of the *Sisypheum's* shields.

The ship screamed over the vox, tearing through the *Sisypheum's* security protocols with the visceral trauma of its name.

Carnager! Carnager! Carnager!

White-hot beams of light seared through the strike cruiser s many decks, the relative movement of the two vessels causing them to whipsaw through its reinforced superstructure. Hundreds of metres of hull plate peeled away, like meal pared from the bone by a butcher's knife.

The force of entire sections venting explosively into hard vacuum heeled the ship over like a pugilist rocked back on their heels.

The auspex screamed with incoming ordnance.

The blood-red light of a mortal wound filled the bridge. It painted Branthan in a daemonic glow.

'You've killed us all,' hissed Sharrowkyn.

Then the world turned inside out.

And red light turned to white.

2

The Way is Open
Echoes of the Past
Back from the Dead

A frozen moment of time.

It stretched, soundless and serene.

Sharrowkyn's first thought was that if this was death, then everything the old-timers on Lycaeus had told him as a rebel youth was wrong.

They'd spoken of death as a fire that consumed you.

It would be painful, they said.

Death was *always* painful in the old-timers' tales, and it was never easy. A good death would be sudden and, if you were lucky, one you wouldn't see coming.

But *this* moment? This eternal moment was peaceful.

Which told Sharrowkyn it wasn't death.

This was something else.

Cold and weightless, Sharrowkyn's gut swelled with nausea, like the worst translation sickness imaginable. His eyes burned, as if micro-scopic needles were slowly pushing into his pupils.

He saw nothing but blinding searing light.

His senses swam in and out of coherence.

Screaming voices, cries of horror, unbridled joy.

These were not voices he knew, for there were men, women, and children who screamed names he'd never heard.

A thousand voices, tens of thousands.

He recognised languages of Terra, as well as dialects that had taken root in the centuries since humanity first set sail from its world. Woven within

them were words never meant to be given voice, daemonic chatterings of razor teeth and loathsome appetite*

Sharrowkyn's mouth tasted metal, and his skull bloated with a raging storm of emotions, only a few of which were his.

Fear, guilt, hoped-for redemption, and overwhelming horror that was only kept from turning into a raging storm of self destruction by iron discipline.

Too much. Too fast.

He felt the synapses within his mind coming untethered, the torrent of emotions eroding them like a surge tide that rips away the supports of a bridge.

The empty white of his vision cleared, and once again he saw the cold steel of buttressed gantries and the riveted steel plates of the ship s bridge.

The *Sisypheum* spun like a leaf on the wind, and an awful sense of vertigo permeated every fibre of Sharrowkyn's being. From his marrow to his psyche, he felt as though he were folding inside out - as if every dimension of his existence were now revealed to be a flimsy construct

No sirens blared, and only the warning hiss of static filled the bridge, like the droning of carrion flies swarming the meat of the battle-fallen. Light flickered at the corner of his vision, and he rolled onto his side closing his eyes as a fresh stab of nausea ripped up through his stomach. The sensation was so unnatural to his transhuman physiology that he almost didn't recognise it.

The feeling passed, and Sharrowkyn gripped the edge of the nearest console to pull himself upright, feeling as weak as a newborn. He blinked away the last of the burning pain in his vision, seeing the rest of the bridge crew recovering from whatever had just happened

'Wayland, what in Medusa's name was that?' demanded Branthan, his mechanised body drooling coolant fluids and crackling with what looked like warp corposant. Garuda lay on the ground, its legs twitching and its eyes flickering with machine light.

Sabik didn't answer, his eyes wide and his lips moving soundlessly, like a servitor in the midst of a mindwipe. Strapped to his command throne. Sabik hadn't fallen like the rest of them, but integrated with the rest of the *Sisypheum's* systems, he'd felt everything the ship had suffered.

'What was that?' repeated Branthan.

Sharrowkyn wanted to check his friend, but knew he had to deal with the most pressing demand before moving to the next

Prioritise and execute.

The surveyor array was a flaring mess of static and distortions, a jumble of signals, datum points and navigational beacons dial bore no resemblance to those in Jupiter's vicinity.

'I don't know,' said Sharrowkyn. 'None of the readings on the auspex make any sense.'

'*Make* them make sense,' ordered Branthan, as if the reality of their surroundings could be made clearer simply by force of will. 'The *Carnager* could be ready to finish us off!'

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'I'm not picking up any ship signatures or engine flares in the void. We're alone out here'

'And where exactly is here? We can't fight effectively if we don't know where we are.'

'If the few datum points I'm picking up are correct, then it looks like...'

'Like what?' said Branthan when Sharrowkyn didn't continue 'Like we made a warp jump,' he said, trying to make sense of what little information he could confirm. 'Everything I'm seeing suggest we're no longer in the Jovian battlespace. We're somewhere above the solar disc, in the outer reaches of the trans-Martian void. Roughly a third of an AU from Terra...'

'That's impossible,' snapped Branthan. 'A warp jump this close to the sun would have torn us apart.'

'I don't know how else to explain it,' said Sharrowkyn, his words growing more confident as fresh information confirmed his hypothesis.

'He's right, captain,' said Wayland, his words slurred with system-shock. 'I felt a huge spike in warp spectra right after the *Carnager* hit us. I don't know exactly what it was, but it was somewhere in the vicinity of the Comet Shrine. Similar to what I'd expect to see when a war fleet translates, but many orders of magnitude larger.'

'A warp rift? This deep in the Solar System? How?' said Branthan, and every one of them knew there could be only one architect of such a traumatic wound in reality.

'Horus Lupercal,' said Sharrowkyn.

'That's how he's going to do it, how he was always going to do it,' said

Wayland, unable to conceal a fleeting admiration for the sheer audacity of so bold a plan's execution. 'The fighting around the Kthonic and Elysian Gates was just to spread out our defences along the solar perimeter. We assumed the gates were the only way Horus could bring his fleets through, but if the scale of these readings is even vaguely accurate, then the traitors could sail a hundred fleets through that rift. Practically into Terra's orbit...'

'So we have a new target,' said Branthan.

'A new target?' said Sharrowkyn, struggling to contain his anger.

'We're dead in the void. The *Carnager's* lasers all but disembowelled us. Every deck below the waterline is compromised. Our drive is offline, and one of the reactors is venting radiation into space like a damn signal flare.'

'Then we find somewhere to repair,' said Branthan.

'Where?' said Sharrowkyn. 'There's nothing out here.'

'An old way station, an abandoned graving yard, a lost research post, something,' said Branthan. 'There must be relics of the first push from Terra drifting out here.'

'I'm telling you, there's nothing,' repeated Sharrowkyn

Wayland twisted in his grav-couch and fixed Sharrowkyn with a piercing stare.

'Nykona,' he said, holding Sharrowkyn's gaze. 'If there is one man I would trust to find something lost in the darkness, it is you. Find us somewhere to heal the hurts done to the *Sisypheum* and we will live to fight on. What is it your brothers say? *From the darkness we strike, fast and lethal. And by the time our foes can react...'*

Sharrowkyn grinned. *'...Darkness there, and nothing more.'*

It took Sharrowkyn twenty-five hours to locate somewhere viable for the *Sisypheum* to effect repairs. Anchored in the void and all but invisible, it was a nameless, hollow cavern of iron with only rudimentary docking facilities and fractional life support

In the earliest days of warships traversing the oceans of Old Earth, such places were known as coaling stations, ports that allowed the navies of the great powers to extend the range and influence of their fleets.

This structure had been designed to allow the first monitor ships to remain on station for extended patrol circuits of the inner-system gulfs. With Old Earth isolated for millennia, and many of the outer reaches of

the Solar System in the hands of xenos, the thin line keeping Terra safe while the Emperor assembled His forces was only maintained by the bravery of its frontier fleets and refuelling stations such as this.

The search for a safe haven had also revealed more about the traumatic warp event that had ripped the fabric of the Solar System asunder. With every passing moment, the scale of the armada passing through the rift opened close to Terra became horrifyingly apparent.

Fleets of such size as had not been seen since the earliest days of the Imperium were translating into real space in an unending flood. Prodigal sons now returned to the system of their birth with blades bared for the sole purpose of murdering their sire.

Bombs would already be falling on Terra, but the *Sisypheum* could do nothing to help.

With the Iron Hands and their monotasked servitors engaged in the repair efforts to the *Sisypheum*, Sharrowkyn had taken to spending his days roaming the cavernous halls of the nameless coaling station. Centuries had passed since ships had last docked here, but the titanic fuelling silos still reeked of congealed promethium and the scabbed residue of volatile engine plasma.

The darkness within was home to Sharrowkyn.

The interior of the *Sisypheum* was a gloomy place, for transhuman warriors had little need of light, and it had no serfs remaining who required illumination. Beyond the handful of Space Marines, only servitors prowled its lonely halls, and they cared nothing for their surroundings.

But this blackness was absolute, a place where light went to die - so all-encompassing, it took Sharrowkyn back to his training with the Shadowmasters, where he had lived for two years without light or vision. Terrifying to a youth, even one blooded in the darkness of Lycaeus, then bearable, before finally becoming bonded so intimately to him that he became part of it.

Sharrowkyn embraced the darkness as a reminder of simpler times.

The echoes of the warships that had docked here at the dawn of the Imperium, perhaps similarly wounded, were all around him.

The names of proud vessels were etched into the walls, names that sounded absurdly quaint to Sharrowkyn. *Black Joke*, *Divine Lip, Dextrous*

Gladiator and Bittersweet Reunion.

The crews of these ships had left their mark too, so many names etched over each other that they had become unreadable. Tens of thousands of them, more. Sharrowkyn understood that this was no mere utilitarian relic of a bygone age.

It was a memorial to the dead, a vast record of those who had conquered the Solar System.

Sharrowkyn wasn't vain enough to imagine that anyone would leave such a memorial for him or the millions who had died in the fires of the Warmaster's betrayal. No, he would die in the dark, for gotten and beyond anyone's wit to recall.

Assuming the Emperor's armies could defeat the traitors, this would be a war the Imperium would wish consigned to the shadows, for it would only serve as a reminder of when humanity's will had failed. Only if Terra fell to the traitors would it be celebrated, as the beginning of a new age, the dawning of Lupercal Imperator's reign.

He paused to run his fingers over the carvings, picturing a crew man in a bulky vac-suit, likely dying of radiation poisoning as he cut into the metal with the tip of a drill bit to secure his little piece of immortality.

Centuries separated Sharrowkyn from this long-dead crewman. But at that moment, alone at the edge of the dark, he felt a powerful connection pass down through the ages.

Sharrowkyn set off once more, pausing every now and then when he saw a name legible enough to read. No one save he would ever read them, but it felt important that at least one person in all the galaxy remember that these men and women had existed at all.

He wished he knew the name of this place, to truly mark their passing.

The vox chirruped in Sharrowkyn's ear.

'Nykona?' said the unmistakably gruff voice of ash and smoke that belonged to Atesh Tarsa. The Apothecary of the Salamanders Legion had kept them alive over the years on the bleeding edges of this conflict, and everyone aboard the *Sisypheum* owed him their life.

But Sharrowkyn wished Tarsa had let one of their number die.

'Where are you?' asked the Apothecary.

'In the darkness. What do you want, Atesh?'

'It's Cadmus Tyro.'

'What about him?'
'He's awake, and he wants to speak to you.'

The apothecarion of the *Sisypheum* had once been as much a place of death as the nameless coaling station. Since the massacre on the black sands of Isstvan V, Ulrach Branthan had lain entombed in ice, his body a wretched conglomeration of torn meat and bone held together by sinew and pure will.

Only the Heart of Iron had kept the captain alive as he writhed in stasis, its Dark Age technologies simultaneously reweaving his flesh and blood even as his mind annealed into the singular blade of vengeance.

And there he would have remained until death had it not been for the damn bird.

For reasons known only to its inscrutable machine consciousness, Garuda had chosen to irreparably disable the stasis controls of Branthan's cryo-chamber, leaving Tarsa no option but to resort to desperate measures to save the life of his patient.

'You should have let him die,' Sharrowkyn had told the Apothecary in the wake of the captain's rebirth. 'His thirst for vengeance will kill us all.'

'If I would have let him die, I would have broken my Apothecary's Oath,' Tarsa had replied. 'I would have been finishing the work of the traitors.

Sharrowkyn had wanted to dispute the point, but this galaxy had seen far too much faithlessness for him to wish one more broken oath on the cosmos.

He passed through the pressurised vestibule and its fog of counterseptic decontaminants.

The airlock hissed closed behind him, sealing him within the sterile environment of the apothecarion. He found Tarsa hunched over a spinning centrifuge. Blood samples whirred in glass tubes and the hum of medicae machinery filled the space. The air tasted of tin, and the lumens flickered overhead, fizzing with poor connectivity to the ship's main grid.

'I see the power is still intermittent,' said Sharrowkyn. Tarsa looked up, his ebon-black face the opposite of the Raven Guard's pallid features. Dull red eyes were set in a craggy, hairless skull, and Sharrowkyn saw a lifetime's sorrow in their depths. He saw Sharrowkyn and smiled weakly.

'Nykona,' he said, offering his hand. 'Welcome back to the light.'

Sharrowkyn took his fellow warrior’s wrist. 'I apologise, brother. I have been a stranger of late.'

Tarsa nodded, and said. 'The sons of the Raven Lord understand the value of solitude. It is a trait I admire. Some of our more... *boisterous* Legion brothers prefer raucous gatherings and overt displays of brotherhood, but, like you, I find such displays tiresome.'

Sharrowkyn smiled. 'There's virtue in both. I’m no hermit, but after Eirene Septimus I needed to take some time to clear my head. I needed to re-evaluate my perceptions.'

'You weren't to blame for what happened.' said Tarsa.

'I *knew*! said Sharrowkyn. 'I knew and I still went along with *Meduson's* plan.'

'Alpharius fooled us all,' brother, said Tarsa. 'And you were not in command.'

'You... should... listen to him,' said a voice from behind a surgical curtain.

Tarsa parted the curtain, and beckoned Sharrowkyn through.

Cadmus Tyro lay upon a steel gurney, surrounded by banks of throbbing machinery: blood pumps, autoimmune boosters and a dozen different monitoring devices plugged directly into the weeping interfaces cut into his flesh.

His wounds had been horrific, near mortal - shattered bones, unchecked internal bleeding, mass-reactive trauma and the complete destruction of numerous organs. That he still drew breath at all was a miracle; few could face a primarch and live.

Tarsa had employed every one of the Apothecary's arts to keep him alive, but the *Sisypheum’s* former captain had fallen into a deathly slumber from which no one had expected him to rise.

Yet, here he was, awake and clear-eyed. Sharrowkyn's eyes roved the captain's synth-wrapped body. The wounds in his chest cavity had been packed and bound, and new flesh was filling the void. Bone splices had stimulated fresh growth, though much of the ossification of his ribs was yet to occur. Bloodstained steel rods scaffolded his legs and left arm, but even now, they were being withdrawn by a pair of drifting servo-skulls.

The agony of the procedure was etched into Tyro's face, like all Iron Hands, he bore pain stoically. Anything else was weakness, and Sharrowkyn's admiration for Cadmus Tyro rose another notch

'The blame for what happened on Eirene Septimus is mine to bear,' said Tyro. ‘For I was in command.'

'I could have stopped you.'

Tyro shook his head, the motion causing a visible stab of pain to spasm through him. The skulls chirruped like irritated insects at his movement.

'All this time on a Tenth Legion ship, and you still don't understand us.'

Sharrowkyn bowed, conceding the point.

'You're looking well for a man Tarsa said would die,' said Sharrowkyn.

'No, I said it was highly likely he would die,’ clarified Tarsa.

'I look I sparred with a Titan and lost,' said Tyro. And feel worse.'

'You fought a primarch,' said Sharrowkyn. 'That’s a whole lot better than I'd expect.'

Tyro nodded, glancing down as another steel rod as thick as his finger was eased out of his flesh. Droplets of blood fell to the brushed-steel floor before the wound sealed behind it.

'Tarsa tells me we are returned to the Solar System?'

'Yes. What else did he tell you?'

‘Not much beyond the fact that we are all but dead in the void, and that you found a place for us to repair.'

'Anything else?'

'Ulrach Branthan,' said Tyro. 'He is back in command now, yes?'

‘He is,' said Sharrowkyn.

'And how... how is he?'

Sharrowkyn glanced at Tarsa. The Apothecary had clearly skirted the issue of Branthan's madness. Sharrowkyn had little time for diplomacy. Tyro would demand directness, but how would he react to the truth about his superior?

'Branthan is insane,' he said.

It took another nine day's before the *Sisypheum* was able to sail again.

The graving dock was a titanic, zero-gravity volume of heavy machinery that had taken the combined genius of Thamatica and Wayland return to functionality. Grinding lifter-cranes hauled vast sheets of tiered steel into place for constructor engines to weld in shower, blue sparks. Cable-slaved proxy drones of ancient, bulky aspect crawled across the vessel's battle-scarred hull, closing tears with web-sealant and anchoring torn plating back to its superstructure.

The servitors and Iron Hands were working wonders to repair it enough to be void-worthy.

The *Sisypheum* would fly again, but its first serious engagement would likely tear the ship apart.

Sharrowkyn found Thamatica, Numen and Wayland arguing in the shadow of the vessel's up-armoured prow. He watched them from the shadows wreathing the gantry above the platform hung upon its battlements.

'Prow cannons. It's the only answer that makes sense,' said Numen, his booming voice crackling over the vox. "We need our hardest fist ready to strike.'

'It'II certainly hit the hardest,' agreed Thamatica. 'But the link from its firing mechanism to weapons control on the bridge is woefully degraded. It will be next to impossible to guarantee a hit unless we're at point-blank range. I assure you, Ignatius, the batteries will work best for us. A better spread of munitions, that's the way.'

'Port-side batteries are smashed, and the starboard capacitors are non-functional,' grunted Numen. 'We'll get one broadside, maybe, then they II not shoot again. I'm telling you, the prow cannon is the weapon we need.'

Wayland looked up and said, 'What do you think, Nykona?'

Sharrowkyn looped over the gantry and pushed down to the iron decking. He landed lightly and engaged the mag-clamps in his boots. He hadn't truly been trying to hide, and Sabik knew him well enough to know when he was lurking.

'Forget weapons,' he said. 'We don't need them any more. Put their energy to better use.'

'Typical Raven Guard,' said Numen, too loudly. The gruff veteran had lost almost all his hearing in battle against the Emperor's Children and had chosen to endure that injury until the war was over. 'What kind of warship goes into battle unarmed?'

Sharrowkyn swept his gaze along the strike cruiser's hull. Its entire length was torn and battered, a ship desperately in need of peace, it bore its many scars proudly, like a prize fighter training for one last bout he couldn't possibly win.

Much like us all.

'The *Sisypheum's* fight is done,' said Sharrowkyn. 'One hard turn will

break her in two.'

'Then we take as many of those traitorous bastards with us as we can,' said Numen. 'One last thrust into the Warmaster's heart.'

'That's Branthan talking,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Captain Branthan,' said Numen. 'You will show him respect, Raven Guard.'

'No disrespect to his rank was intended,' Sharrowkyn assured him. 'And you all know me enough to know that I do not fear death in battle. But we have not fought our way back from Isstvan V just to throw our lives away within sight of Terra.'

'We can still fight,' said Thamatica. 'There is damage we can yet do.'

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'That's arrogance talking,' he said. 'You all saw the scale of the fleet that came through the rift at the Comet Shrine. Even the grandest destruction we might possibly wreak would be like spitting in the wind.'

'So what are you suggesting?' snorted Numen, his words dripping with contempt. 'That we hide? Wait until this war is decided then limp back into the light?'

Sharrowkyn ignored the barb and said, 'We have fought as brothers for years, but it is over. It is time for us to return to our Legions.'

'Captain Branthan will never allow that,' said Wayland.

'Captain Tyro believes it is the right answer,' replied Sharrowkyn. His words were unexpected and hit them hard in the flank, just as he'd intended.

'The captain has risen from his coma?' said Thamatica. Sharrowkyn pointed to the *Sisypheum*. 'He has, and this has been his ship longer than Branthan's.'

The implications of Sharrowkyn's words were so unexpectedly direct that it took the three Iron Hands a full second to realise what he was suggesting.

'You dare suggest mutiny against my captain?' raged Numen, his hand on his bolter.

'Branthan is a madman,' said Sharrowkyn. 'He will see us all dead for the sake of his madness. You all know it.'

'You go too far, Sharrowkyn,' said Thamatica, stepping between them. 'You are not Iron Hands - you do not see things as we see them.'

'You are correct, Frater,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Just as I saw them differently when Alpharius walked among us with Shadrak Meduson's face. You should have listened to me then, and you need to listen to me now. Ulrach Branthan is not fighting for any cause beyond his own vengeance. The pain has broken him, and he will damn us all in the fires of his madness.'

Numen wrenched his bolter free, but Wayland had seen the fury building in him and held his arm down. The veteran made a quarter-turn to Wayland in furious disbelief.

'You would defend these words, Sabik?' he demanded.

'I think we should at least hear him out.'

'I have heard enough,' snapped Numen. 'This is mutiny.'

'Tyro agrees with me,' said Sharrowkyn. 'As does Tarsa. And so do you, Sabik.'

'Is that true, Wayland?' asked Thamatica.

Thamatica was known for his mordant sense of humour, but Sharrowkyn heard the tension resonating within his tone like a taut cable on the verge of snapping.

Wayland heard it too and glanced up. Sharrowkyn felt his friend's disappointment that he had forced him into this corner, but what other choice was there?

Wayland released Numen's arm and took a step away.

'Throne help me, but I do,' he said, 'though it cuts against the grain of all I have been trained to believe. The chain of command is meant to be inviolable, but the forge teaches us that when a blade is tempered it becomes hard and brittle. To remove that brittleness, the smiter must use a careful heat before allowing his metal to cool over time. Captain Branthan's soul is fresh from the furnace of his resurrection, and if we participate in a plan of action we know to be flawed, then we are just as responsible for the consequences of its failure.'

Numen slowly mag-locked his bolter back to his armour and shook his head in disgust.

'That it should come to this,' said the veteran with real remorse. 'We face the ruin of the Imperium, and still we find ways to turn on one another.'

'I am not turning on you, brother,' said Wayland.

'You talk of usurping the captain of this vessel!' snapped Numen. 'A warrior appointed by the Great Ferrus himself. How else can your words

be interpreted?'

The veteran turned and marched away.

Thamatica sighed. 'He will go straight to Branthan.'

'We all should,' said Wayland.

3

Counsel of Traitors
Lunar Voices
Good Kill

Cadmus Tyro walked back onto the bridge of the *Sisypheum* to see Ulrach Branthan standing at the captain's lectern, two things he hadn't expected after the mission to Eirene Septimus. He buried his shock at Branthan's appearance in a grimace of pain, horrified at what had become of his brother warrior.

He'd caught a glimpse of him as Sharrowkyn and Wayland hauled his broken body from the belly of the Storm Eagle. In his pain-filled delirium, he'd thought Brother Bombastus had returned, before remembering his death on the eldar crone world.

The bridge smelled of hot metal and electricity. Servitors worked to return the various bridge stations to functionality. Data screens fizzed with static, and a tattoo of hammers on metal echoed strangely through the superstructure. Garuda flitted from the stanchions overhead, the clicking of its wings blending with the clatter of machines.

Atesh Tarsa walked behind Tyro. He had told the Apothecary to stay back, to not hover at his side. He couldn't be seen to return as an invalid. Ignatius Numen stood next to Branthan, with Frater Thamatica close by. Nykona Sharrowkyn, as always, lurked on the periphery, near the auspex station, with Sabik Wayland seated to helm control.

The gulf between these warriors was clear.

The Iron Hands stood taller and prouder at the sight of him. Regardless of what threatened their unity, he was still a captain and deserving of their respect.

Tyro raised his fist and gently tapped it against his chest. He'd wanted to wear his armour, to show he was returned entirely but Tarsa had point-blank refused to allow it. And for once, Tyro had acquiesced to a demand.

'Brothers,' he said. 'Rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated.'

Wayland came forward and they clasped arms in the warrior's grip, wrist to wrist.

'Welcome back, Captain Tyro,' said Wayland.

Sharrowkyn gave him a nod of respect. Tyro stepped towards his Iron Hands brothers, reading the twin emotions of joy and wariness at his revival. Joy, for he was their captain and had led them in battle against traitors and primarchs; wariness, because his return might be the unwitting cause of a schism within their ranks.

Thamatica bowed deeply and said, 'It pleases me to see you back among the living.'

'Not as much as it pleases me,' Tyro assured him, now facing Numen. 'You've healed well, brother,' he said.

The veteran had suffered grievous wounds at the hands of Gaskon Malthace, one of Alpharius' killers, but it took more than an Alpha legionnaire to put down one of the Avernii.

'The Salamander knows his craft,' said Numen, managing to sound grateful and begrudging at the same time.

Tyro finally turned to Ulrach Branthan.

Tarsa and Sharrowkyn had warned him of the hideous transformation wrought upon Branthan, but it was still a shock to see how profoundly the captain had changed. What had not changed was the intensity of the zeal burning behind his eyes. The monstrous captain had always been one of the Legion's most fervent adherents to the Iron Creed, but Tyro saw immediately that Sharrowkyn had been right.

There was little left of Ulrach Branthan in his brother's gaze, only a depth of madness and pain too awful to contemplate.

'I am so sorry, brother,' said Tyro. 'To see you like this...'

'Spare me your pity,' said Branthan. 'I am thankful for this new chance to serve the Emperor. Pain is my blood now - it sustains me. It empowers me.'

Tyro nodded, not knowing how to answer something that sounded like a sentiment their foes might express.

'The *Sisypheum's* seen a hard fight,' he said. 'She has fought proudly, has she not?'

"You make it sound like her war is over,' said Branthan.

Tyro frowned. 'Isn't it? Iron Father Wayland apprised me of her condition. Even half the damage she has sustained would condemn her in the eyes of a shipwright assayer.'

'You underestimate this ship,' said Branthan, stepping down from the command rostrum and moving from station to station with thudding, iron footfalls. 'She fought her way clear of the massacre on Isstvan V, and sustained us through years of guerilla warfare. She broke a traitor blockade and flew through cursed space to a lost world of the eldar. And lastly, under my command, she took on the Iron Heart, a ship many times her size.'

Branthan returned to the command lectern and stood behind it.

The blatant symbolism was not lost on Tyro.

This is no longer your ship...

'While the *Sisypheum* yet has fight left in her we will continue to bring death to the traitors. Do you take issue with that, or my resumption of command?'

'I take issue with neither, my captain,' said Tyro. 'But the *Sisypheum* cannot fight like this. We cannot fight like this. Look around you -six legionaries and a handful of servitors to crew a strike cruiser? It cannot be done.'

'It has been done,' said Branthan. 'In the Jovian engagement we slew the *Covenant of Truth*, an Oberon-class predator-ship.'

'I studied the battle-vectors of that fight,' said Tyro, following Branthan's example and pacing from station to station. 'It was a good kill, an excellent kill. Boldly made, but you were lucky beyond belief. Had the *Covenant's* captain not been so obsessed with his own kill, we would all be dead.'

Branthan stepped down to meet him. 'This is war for the survival of the Imperium, Cadmus,' he said. 'Without boldness we will not win. Horus will take Terra, and all we have fought and bled for will have been for nothing.'

The tension thickened, everyone on the bridge save for the servitors keeping utterly silent and motionless. Veils of light sparked into life,

cascades of sensor data drifting like fireflies. Garbled voices scratched the air in blurts of static.

Squalls of ghost binaric code faded in and out of audibility.

Garuda flew down from above and landed at the edge of the console between the two captains, as though ready to arbitrate some dispute. It looked from captain to captain.

'Honour has been satisfied, Ulrach,' said Tyro, keeping his voice low and even. 'Look around you. Look at our ship. Look at how few of us remain. No one could say we did not do battle with all our hearts but the time of the Shattered Legions is over. Our war in the shadows is done, and we must rejoin our brethren to look our enemies in the face. To do otherwise is to gainsay the word of Rogal Dorn.'

'You speak for the lord of the Seventh?'

'I presume no such thing,' said Tyro, 'But all the Emperor's loyal sons have heard the call to return to defend the Throneworld. It is time for us to heed that call, Ulrach. It is time for us to come in from the cold.'

Branthan listened to Tyro's impassioned plea, but it was impossible to read his ravaged features. The captain remained silent for long moments, eventually turning to face Sabik Wayland.

'How long before we can be underway?'

'The *Sisypheum* can fly, but there are critical systems not yet fully functional. Long-range auspex, full weapons control and vox are all still offline.'

'How long?'

Wayland glanced at Tyro. Branthan saw it, and said, 'Cadmus Tyro is not the commander of this vessel, / am! Answer me.'

'The reactors are still hot,' said Wayland. 'We can be underway as soon as the word is given.'

'The word is given,' said Branthan.

'Ulrach-' began Tyro.

'Enough!' snapped Branthan, towering over him. 'I am captain of this vessel and we fight until we are dead. There is no turning away, no retreat to Terra. You think a handful of us skulking behind a wall will make more of a difference than we can with a starship? To turn and run for the imagined safety of Terra is not an honourable laying down of our burden, it is *cowardice*. I will not allow it. Not on my ship.'

A flurry of sparks erupted from the comms-station behind Sabik Wayland, as if in response to Branthan's outburst. A screaming wail of howling binaric erupted from the vox-horns mounted on buckled stanchions.

'Shut that off?' said Branthan, striding over to the station and pushing the hapless servitor out of his path. The console was smashed, almost every panel removed to reveal its guts of wires and glass valves.

He turned to face Wayland with a groan of hydraulics and a crackle of uninsulated cabling.

'I thought you said the vox was inactive?'

'It is,' said Wayland, rushing to Branthan's side. 'The antenna array is smashed.'

'Then explain what we're hearing.'

Wayland sorted through a handful of cables, found the ones he wanted and slotted them home into jacks built into the underside of his gauntlet. Thamatica hurried over to the console and followed suit. The two Iron Fathers stood riveted to the spot, a pale nimbus of light surrounding their hands. The sounds of the message hissed all around them, as if carried on the air.

'It's not coming through the ship's vox,' said Wayland.

'Then where is it coming from?' said Tyro.

'It's coming from the Kryptos,' said Thamatica. 'The creature is routing it to this console.'

'The Kryptos?' said Tyro. 'Is it picking up some stray Mechanicum transmissions?'

'That's not Martian code,' said Wayland, adjusting the dials and gain levers on the smashed console. 'That's the code of Luna.'

'What are you talking about?' said Tyro. 'Luna has fallen.'

'It's coming from a native of Luna,' insisted Wayland. 'Only they can send in this form.'

'We trained on Mars,' said Thamatica. We know Mechanicum code, and that's not it.'

'Then it's traitor communication,' said Branthan. 'The Sons of Horus have their Terran bridgehead there. They must have compromised the Selenar's systems.'

Wayland's face was bathed silver in the light of a helical waveform

flickering on the last, cracked display slate.

'Wait, is that...?' said Wayland.

'Throne! Yes... I think it is. But how...?'

"What is it, Prater?' asked Branthan.

Thamatica disconnected from the console and said, 'If we're right and I suspect we are, then this is not a Mechanicum or Imperial transmission. Nor is it from the traitors.'

'Then who is it from?' asked Tyro.

'This is a long-dead channel,' said Wayland. 'It's a Selenar cult signal.'

'But what is it saying?' asked Branthan.

'We don't know yet,' said Wayland. 'But a gene-witch is screaming into the void.'

Atesh Tarsa remembered the first time he had set eyes on the Kryptos when Sharrowkyn and Sabik Wayland had brought it aboard the *Sisypheum*. Its hideous appearance had sickened him. He had hated it, but as the years passed, he began to pity what had been done to it - living in agony, forever bound to a singular purpose for cruel masters who cared nothing for its suffering.

That was no life, but were he and the crew of the *Sisypheum* any better?

The Kryptos had not left this cell of bare iron, as much a slave to their purpose as it had been to its former masters. It sat bound to an iron throne, surrounded by banks of humming machinery and linked to chattering cogitators by snaking lengths of heavily insulated cables.

That such a thing could exist at all flew in the face of all he had learned in the apothecarion. Its head slumped to the side, and its pale flesh, stinking and greasy, was pasted over the sunken bones of its skull like wet parchment. The lower half of its face was a grotesquerie of moving parts, augmitters, vox-implants and sound-creating anatomies that chattered with strange clicks, whistles and ticks. Its skull had been taken apart and remade: a mix of brass, bone and glass, like a vat for the preservation of a hideous medical anomaly. The fluid within was cloudy and stagnant, and the visible portions of its hybridised brain pressed against the glass, the bleached white of something long dead

Nor was it wholly human - portions of its mandibular structure were clearly xenos in origin, though sourced from no alien Tarsa had ever fought. It wore a blindfold, for no one could look into its pain-filled eyes

and not be horrified at its suffering.

Garuda shuffled from clawed foot to clawed foot atop the throne. Tarsa thought it looked like some scavenger bird, waiting for a hanged man to die so it could peck his eyes out.

A wet, organic-sounding binaric issued from its throat. Yellowish fluid dribbled from its jaws as it formed the un-words over and over again. A lectern bolted to the deck before it flickered with light, burbling a stream of nonsensical data in an endless loop.

'What is this abomination saying?' asked Ulrach Branthan, leaning down so that his mutilated features were an inch from those of the Kryptos.

The irony of Branthan calling the Kryptos an abomination was not lost on Tarsa.

'The cogitators are trying to figure it out,' said Wayland, feeding brass-edged punch cards into the logic engine. 'This is a dead vox-band. No one's used these channels for centuries. Whoever is transmitting must be desperate indeed to hope their message will be picked up by anyone with the capabilities to translate it. The Selenar were said to use an organic form of *genobinary*, a lingua-technis utilising a rotating cypher based upon the sender's unique genome sequence. Which made it almost impossible to decode.'

'So we can't know what it's saying?' said Branthan.

'Ah, I didn't say that,' said Thamatica, wagging an admonishing finger.

'Can you break the code? And spare me a historia lecture. Yes or no?'

'I rather suspect the Selenar did not envisage the existence of the Kryptos when they developed this form of communication.' said Thamatica. 'Which surprises me, as some of the bioengineered chimeras they wrought in their vaults were not entirely dissimilar, and-'

'I said yes or no, Prater.'

'Yes!' said Wayland, as the cogitator spat out glowing lines of text.

'You have it?' said Thamatica.

'I have it,' said Wayland. 'You were right - I had to run the genome sample back multiple iterations until the Kryptos was able to break it.'

'What does it say?' said Tarsa, before the two Iron Fathers could go deep into the technicalities of their cryptography.

Wayland nodded and said, 'It says: These are the words of Ta'lab Vita-37. My iteration is my name. My sequence speaks to the veracity of my

words. The Wolves are loosed, and Luna falls again. My truth is this, I haw failed. For centuries I kept the Magna Mater safe, but the First Son of Horus calls 'Aebathan' to his master. Any who hear this, I beg you to destroy Lunar Dome Herodotus Omega. Wipe it clean of life before he breaks the seventh seal."

A shiver ran down Tarsa's spine.

'The Magna Mater...?' he said.

'Do those words mean something to you. Apothecary?' asked Branthan.

'Yes. It means we must reach Luna with all haste,' said Tarsa.

Before Branthan could ask anything else, the Kryptos shrieked in paroxysms of agony.

Its back arched and it thrashed in the throes of a violent seizure as the shrieks of something infernal tore through its open mind.

'Carnager! Carnager! Carnager!'

'Get us out of here!' barked Tyro, getting behind the command lectern.

Sharrowkyn tried to make sense of what he was seeing on the auspex station. The display screamed with the lunatic ravings of the incoming vessel. Its ululating howl was a mindless exultation, insane agony given voice.

'We're still anchored to the graving dock,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Then cast us off!'

"Working on it!'

The *Sisypheum* shuddered as enemy munitions detonated on its rear quarter.

"Work faster,' ordered Tyro.

A deep bass rumble echoed through the *Sisypheum's* superstructure The booming clangs of docking clamps disengaging sent shuddering vibrations through the deck plates.

'Releasing,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Now find that ship.'

The deck tilted underfoot as Tyro pushed power to the drives. Local gravity skewed strangely as the *Sisypheum* powered away from the mass of the coaling station. More juddering tremors raced the length of the ship, its steel skeleton deforming under the torsion and shearing forces of battle.

A powerful explosion rocked the ship. Gravity weakened, then strengthened. Recently repaired systems blew out again. The servitors

chattered to one another in squeals of simplified binaric.

'Where is it, Sharrowkyn?'

'Below us, I think.'

'Show me.'

Sharrowkyn threw the display onto the viewscreen. Cascades of crackling photons fell in a waterfall of light. Patterns of distortion swam in the illumination, peaks and troughs representing energy signatures, radiation spikes and patches of heat.

Sharrowkyn could make little of what he was seeing, but Tyro was a master of void war and immediately saw opportunity in the riot of atomic flares and laser discharges.

'He's damaged and too eager,' said Tyro. 'His auspex couldn't clearly distinguish us from the coaling station so he fired too soon.'

The vox-horns blared. *'Carnager! Carnager! Carnager!'*

'He's pushing in on our ventral axis,' said Tyro. 'Trying to disembowel us.'

'And you know how to prevent that?'

'I fought us clear of Isstvan V, didn't I?'

'Then this should be easy.'

More hits struck the ship's underside, raking fire designed to strip a vessel's shields. The *Sisypheum's* voids had yet to ignite, and every hit was a penetrating wound. Fire bloomed alongside jets of freezing oxygen. Their ship was bleeding into the vacuum of space.

'Please tell me Thamatica chose to rearm the prow cannon,' said Tyro.

'I don't know, captain.'

'Get me a firing solution anyway.'

'A firing solution? How? Weapons control is smashed.'

'Then give it your best guess. Hold on.'

Sharrowkyn stumbled over to weapons control as Tyro cut the *Sisypheum's* drive and fired every one of its manoeuvring thrusters against their direction of travel.

The ship groaned in protest at so drastic a deceleration, compressional forces stressing the keel from stem to bow. Sharrowkyn slammed into the console. Freshly welded armour plates tore loose and hydraulic lines blew out all along the strike cruiser's length.

Deafening squalls of interference echoed through the vaults of the bridge as close-in deflectors ruptured and the *Carnager's* course angled it

upwards in front of the *Sisypheum*.

Proximity alarms blared as the two city-sized ships practically grazed one another.

'We're going to collide,' said Sharrowkyn.

He had witnessed two capital ships crashing once before, in low orbit over Kiavahr. Until the massacre at Isstvan V, it had been one of the worst things he'd ever seen. Ancient works of the shipwright's art torn apart by unimaginable forces. Ten thousand dead in the first instant, flash-frozen by the hard vacuum of space as their hulls ripped open. A hundred thousand more burned in oxygen-rich fires sprinting through the wreckage and vaporising everything in their path.

The auspex swelled with e-mag bloom. The *Carnager* was everything. It blotted out all else with its murder-bulk.

'Carnager! Carnager! Carnager!'

The signature was so vast it filled the auspex. Sharrowkyn switched back to the ordinary view through the oculus bay. The jagged, blood-daubed hull of the *Carnager* filled the viewscreen.

'Fire!' yelled Tyro.

Sharrowkyn sent the order, hoping against hope that Numen's argument had won out.

"The bombardment cannon's shell travelled the distance to its target in a fraction of a second, and its armour-piercing cone bored through the plating of its command deck half a second later.

The *Carnager* spasmed with the force of the blast, the cone of the explosion's plasma jet cutting down like a power sword through the spine of an outflanked foe. The traitor vessel's keel was sliced clean through, and the two halves of the ship buckled inward as though folding at a hinge point.

Plumes of fire filled the screen, a blazing inferno devouring every scrap of oxygen within the *Carnager*. Its hull bulged and blew out as secondary explosions ripped along its length in a cascade of obliteration.

The *Sisypheum* powered through the explosion, the light of the *Carnager's* destruction filling the bridge with the hellish fire of a void death. Warning lights and damage icons lit up across every station, but it didn't matter.

The *Carnager* was dead.

'Good kill,' said Tyro.

The resurrection of Ulrach Branthan.

BOOK 2

MOTHER

She has become everything and everyone.
To recognise this is to live in wonder.

4

Aebathan
Magna Mater
The Ocean of Storms

The descent through the solar disc took another seven days.

Branthan demanded greater speed, but the *Sisypheum* was slowly dying. Critical systems were failing faster than the Iron Hands could repair them, and if Branthan pushed too hard, he would strand them in the endless dark.

Snapshots of the war came to them through intermittent vox signals - impossible reports of exploding moons, of Rogal Dorn's flagship besieged, and fleet engagements beyond anything anyone had seen in living memory. So many lurid tales of the void afire and planets shattered that they blurred together in an unending stream of horror, death and atrocity.

The Warmaster had come in overwhelming force, leaving nothing to chance and wrong-footing the defenders of Terra at every turn. The Solar System was burning.

After Tyro and Sharrowkyn's destruction of the *Carnager*, an uneasy comity had been restored to the *Sisypheum*. In part, due to the revelations brought to them by Atesh Tarsa via the Kryptos, but also Branthan' acceptance that Tyro was his equal.

The silver disc of Luna filled the viewscreen. the first light of Old Earth's night.

Wayland brought them in slowly, as far as possible from the vast traitor fleets anchored in high orbit and awaiting their tasking orders for Terra. Despite every horror the warriors aboard the *Sisypheum* had faced and overcome, nothing could have prepared them for the sight of their former brothers massing over the Throneworld.

World Eaters, Sons of Horus, Death Guard, Emperor's Children, Thousand Sons...

Names that were once bywords for courage, honour and nobility.

Now they could no longer be said without suffering a blade of grief to the heart.

'So many...' said Thamatica. 'How can Terra possibly hold?'

'Lord Dorn has had years to prepare for this day,' said Cadmus Tyro. 'If anyone can hold Terra, it will be him. Hold to that, brothers.'

Tyro's words were spoken confidently, and though the Praetorian of Terra's reputation was well deserved, everyone on the *Sisypheum* understood that even the greatest master of siege defence would blanch at facing this numberless host.

The dark side was lousy with the burning wrecks of defence platforms whose orbits were steadily declining as they shed plates of armour like bladed rain to the Lunar surface. Wayland fought to keep the *Sisypheum's* plasma signatures low, relying on the manoeuvring jets to fractionally alter course to avoid drifting, city-sized chunks of debris hurled into orbit by the force of the traitor bombardments.

In truth there was virtually no need for stealth: the wounded emissions of their ship's reactor core blended with the atomic firestorms painting the black curve of the horizon with a borealis of blood.

'The Selenar cults fought hard.' said Tyro. 'The traitors paid a heavy price.'

'As did the Imperium at its dawn,' pointed out Wayland.

Explosions still flared over the glowing curve of the Lunar surface, and blinking streams of laser light flashed between the last remaining defenders and the enemy's murder ships.

'Are we sure the fight is over?' asked Numen.

'It's over,' said Tarsa.

'How do you know, Salamander?' said Branthan.

Tarsa drew a finger across his neck.

'Aebathan,' he said.

In the wake of the *Carnager's* destruction they had gathered in the armoury to debate the significance of the message received by the Kryptos. Surrounded by their meagre supply of weapons and ammunition, Atesh Tarsa told them what he knew.

'You have heard the term Aebathan before?' asked Tyro.

Tarsa nodded. 'I have. My Legion fought alongside the Luna Wolves, back when they still held to that name. Back when we still counted them as brothers. During those years, I heard the word Aebathan more than any other.'

'What does it mean?' said Sharrowkyn, seated on an empty ammo crate.

'It is a Cthonian term for the cutting of a rival gang leader's throat all the way back to the spine,' explained Tarsa. 'The term was adopted by the Legion to mean the successful conclusion of a campaign.'

Tyro shook his head. 'So it signals the traitors have taken Luna? We already knew that. It changes nothing. We should still make for Terra.'

'No,' insisted Tarsa. 'We have to reach Luna.'

*Why?' said Branthan. 'Because of this Magna Mater? What is it?'

Tarsa hesitated before speaking. Eventually he took a breath and said, 'I am a proud son of Nocturne, born and raised in the shade of Mount Deathfire. My first breath was ashes and smoke, my first sight a sky filled with flame, and my first grip was upon a smiting hammer. My word is my bond, and every oath I have sworn remains unbroken.'

'None gathered here doubt you. Brother Tarsa,' said Wayland. 'Why do you tell us this?'

'Because just as every tech-priest is inducted into the mysteries of the sacred machine on the red planet, so too are Apothecaries made privy to secret knowledge birthed deep in Luna's vaults. To reveal the moon's secrets, even to my battle-sworn brothers, would be to break a gravely sworn oath.'

'Understood, Apothecary,' said Branthan. 'But if this is information your commander requires, you are duty-bound to reveal it. I give you leave to break your oath.'

'With respect, Captain Branthan, you are not of the Eighteenth, and even if you were, that leave is not yours to give,' said Tarsa. 'In this moment, I *choose* to break this oath. The burden of that will be mine to bear until my death.'

Nykona Sharrowkyn came forward and placed a hand on Tarsa's shoulder guard.

'I have known you since the betrayal at Isstvan,' said the Raven Guard. 'In that time we have shed our own blood and that of the traitors. You call a

different world home, and name another primarch as your liege lord, but we are brothers, you and I. We are bonded in a way that few beyond our grim confraternity will ever know. All of us here understand what holding true to an oath means, what it *really* means. We would not be fighting our brothers if we did not. We fight against a foe that broke their sacred oaths, so I understand why you hesitate. But we are nearing the end of this war, and even a fractional misstep may cost us dearly. I know it is wrong of us to expect this of you, but if breaking your oath shares information that will help us fight the traitors, then it is a burden I willingly share.'

'As do I,' said Sabik Wayland.

'And I,' said Thamatica.

Ignatius Numen said, 'I'd sooner die than break an oath, but if you must, then I'll gladly share the burden of yours if it means we stick a pneuma-wrench in the Warmaster's plans.'

'Thank you, brothers,' said Tarsa.

'So tell us,' said Branthan. 'What is the Magna Mater?'

'Understand this first, Captain Branthan,' said Tarsa. The Selenar's rites are shrouded in metaphor and symbolism. Even after years learning from them, it was difficult to be certain of anything, especially when the Legion warriors were viewed as little better than spies. My understanding of the Lunar faith is incomplete, for the Selenar do not easily share the truth of a belief system that almost saw them destroyed in the earliest days of the First Solar War. I want you all to understand that before I go on.'

'We understand,' said Tyro. 'Go on.'

Tarsa nodded. 'Broadly speaking, their cults believe each individual life is but the sum total of genetic archetypes that have endured throughout human history. Like most faiths, they are heavily factionalised, and each cult venerates the helical mysteries of our species in different ways.'

Numen growled and shook his head. 'We've wiped out cultures for less.'

'Indeed we have,' said Tarsa, more sharply than he intended. 'But the Selenar had two things the Emperor needed - a knowledge of gene-craft that outstripped His own, and industrial-scale facilities to match the scope of His ambition. Thus they were spared obliteration. The Emperor yoked Luna's cults and tasked them with building armies mighty enough to conquer a galaxy.'

'And the Magna Mater? It was linked to this faith of theirs?' asked Tyro.

'I never heard any of the gene-witches speak of the Magna Mater directly, but oblique references to it lie at the heart of every one of their most secret mysteries,' said Tarsa, struggling to find words to express a mystery even he did not fully understand. 'Its literal meaning is “Great Mother", an ancient Romanii name for Cybele.'

'The Anatolian goddess of fertility and creation?' said Thamatica

'Yes. During my time on laina, it was little more than a myth, said to be the fabled fountainhead of the earliest and most powerful Space Marine genetics. I never believed it ever truly existed, more that it was likely an allegorical representation of their vast knowledge. But what if it does exist? What if it is something tangible? What if it is the very source code of the Space Marines? Imagine that power in the hands of the traitors. That is why we must set course to Luna and not Terra.'

"And this Ta'Iab Vita-37...? Her words carry weight?' asked Ulrach Branthan.

Tarsa nodded. 'Given the numerals following her designation, Ta'lab Vita-37 must be a senior member of the Selenar cults. So, yes, her words carry weight.'

'Then do we do as she asks?' said Numen. 'Do we destroy the Lunar dome?'

'Let us not be hasty,' said Thamatica. 'If the Magna Mater is literally the root of the most powerful Space Marine genetics, surely we cannot simply destroy it out of hand?'

If a gene-witch of Ta'Iab Vita-37's rank says it must be done, then she has good reason,' said Tarsa. 'The Luna Wolves must be close to taking it.'

'How would we even destroy a mountain?' asked Tyro. That's what she's asking for, is it not? A Lunar dome is a dead volcano, yes?'

'll is,' said Tarsa.

'Then how do you imagine we could do that?' said Numen. 'The *Sisypheum* no longer has the capability to destroy much of anything, let alone an entire volcano.'

'You can destroy any location if you can get inside it,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Wayland, your support here would be appreciated,' said Thamatica. 'You cannot seriously think this is the right course of action? No Iron Father would sanction the destruction of knowledge.'

‘In that you are correct,' said Wayland. 'But if the Magna Mater truly is

what Apothecary Tarsa suspects it may be, then the threat of the traitors getting it off Luna is too great to risk. Regrettably, I believe we have no choice but to destroy the Lunar dome.'

In desperation, Thamatica turned his focus to Cadmus Tyro and Ulrach Branthan.

'Captains, this knowledge is what allowed the Emperor Himself to build the Legiones Astartes. None of us would be here without it. It is our heritage, our genetic link to the past. To allow it to be consumed by fire will deny the hope for a future.'

Thamatica paused to collect his thoughts before speaking again, taking great effort to contain his mounting frustration and disbelief at what he was hearing.

'Brothers, this war against Horus has taken a grievous toll on our ranks, and who knows how many of us will be left alive when finally the guns fall silent? The Emperor will need this knowledge if He is to rebuild the Imperium back from the ashes. It is our sacred duty to save it for the Space Marines yet to be, the warriors who will come after us and stand on the walls in the ages yet to come.

Cadmus Tyro folded his arms and said, 'I agree with you, but the risks are too great. Captain Branthan, what are your thoughts?

'The risks are great,' agreed Ulrach Branthan. 'But nothing of worth was ever achieved without some risk. I will offer you this course of action, Prater Thamatica. We will go to Luna, and we will make every attempt to secure the Magna Mater. But if there is even the slightest chance of it falling into the hands of the traitors, we destroy it. Agreed?'

It was the best Thamatica was going to get, and he knew it. 'Agreed,' he said.

The *Sisypheum* drifted through the debris field of Luna's great Ring. The destroyed belt of defensive platforms had once formed an unbreakable circuit around the moon's circumference, a lethal cordon of lance batteries, torpedo launchers and macro-cannon arrays.

Wreckage from the devastated Ring still tumbled in the upper reaches of Lunar space burning like comets in the void. Layered banks of debris wreathed the surface in shadow as clouds of ablated fragments and pulverised metal fell in ever-declining orbits to the surface

To see something so monolithic brought low was almost beyond

comprehension. Its defences had been designed to repel a sustained campaign of invasion, but it had been obliterated in an instant.

The darkness over Luna was a stark reminder that nothing was unbreakable.

Even with the distortions and interference fouling the Lunar atmosphere. the descent of a vessel of the *Sisypheum's* displacement would not go unnoticed, so Wayland had brought them close to the surface within a vast, hollowed-out cylinder of falling wreckage. In addition to enabling them to reach the surface undetected, it served the secondary' purpose of shielding them from the falling debris.

It had once been a facility for mass-warhead launches on the Ring's coreward defensive array, and its smouldering descent was currently arcing a solder-bright line over the Oceanus Procellarum. Its rate of tumble was low, and thus Wayland had moored the *Sisypheum* within its latticed structure in a feat of bravura piloting skills.

Mag-locks and sinew-taut tethers kept the ship in place, immobile and silent.

In around fifteen hours, the falling structure would slam down somewhere over the southern polar regions

The *Sisypheum's* mission would be over then.

Sharrowkyn peered over Wayland's shoulder through the patched and cracked canopy of the Storm Eagle as the endless grey expanse of Terra's moon drifted below. The battered gunship hung inverted from an open embarkation deck, ready to drop to the surface at Wayland's command. Even though they were shielded from the worst of the debris rain falling from orbit, a rattling, clanging of impacts transferring through the gunship's hull sounded unnervingly like taking small-arms fire.

Lunar Dome Herodotus Omega was a solitary shield volcano to the south of a pair of impact craters in the midst of the Oceanus Procellarum. One, a high-albedo crater known as Aristarchus, was empty and desolate, but the other was filled with the arc lights of a port facility. The rim of this crater was ringed with lifter arrays, hanging limp over fire-dusted platforms, surrounded by materiel hangars and transit hubs that wound out over the surface.

Stationed five hundred metres above the largest platform was the bladed form of a starship.

'Sons of Horus destroyer,' said Wayland, reading the vessel's mass and displacement by its outline. 'Hunter-class. Onboard registry lists it as the *Cthonian Scion.'*

'Just a gunboat,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Still orders of magnitude too powerful for us,' said Wayland. 'We've enough rounds for maybe one dogfight. After that, we ll be shooting mass-reactives from the hatches.'

Wayland opened a vox-channel to the troop compartment.

'There's an enemy vessel stationed on target,' he said.

The vox crackled with a strange double echo as Branthan replied.

'Has it seen us?'

'No,' said Wayland. 'We'd already be dead if it had.'

'Then we proceed as planned,' ordered Branthan.

'Understood, captain,' he said.

Sharrowkyn had never thought to be this close to Luna, one of the great, mythic locations of the Solar System. Its rugged surface was strewn with blackened battle wreckage from the destroyed Ring and shards of metal hung in glittering veils like layered bands of sediment in a dark ocean. Despite all that, Luna was something of a disappointment.

'Not much to look at, is it?' said Wayland, as if reading his thoughts.

'It's not what I expected,' admitted Sharrowkyn.

'What did you expect?'

'Something like a forge world, I suppose. Temples, towers and domes. That sort of thing.'

'Ah, then you should see Mars sometime,' said Wayland fondly. The seat of the Martian priesthood is studded with ancient structures, its volcanoes crowned with glittering forge-temples and titanic monuments to man's union with machinery. The planet's metal skin is threaded with thrumming power conduits like veins through red flesh, and to watch the rise of the Mechanicum Borealis as it crowns Olympus Mons is to know beauty.'

'That's certainly not Luna,' said Sharrowkyn, staring at the ocean of silver dust and ancient impact craters.

'No,' agreed Wayland. 'Mars has always been brash in its displays of power, but the Selenar keep their secrets well hidden.'

'The best way to keep a secret is to not let anyone know you have a secret in the first place,' said Sharrowkyn.

'The ability to create life is the greatest power of all.' said Wayland.

'It's hard to keep something like that secret.'

'It surprises me to hear an Iron Hand say that,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Why? Because we know that flesh is ultimately weaker than iron? Or because you think we despise flesh?'

'I'm not sure. Both? Your creed is still a mystery to me.'

'You are not Medusan, and your gene-sire was not murdered before your very eyes - how could you possibly understand my Legion?' said Wayland. 'I do not say that as any kind of insult, my friend. It is simply a fact. You would not expect me to understand the soul of your Legion after so short a time, would you?'

'No.'

'The Tenth know that flesh is weak, but the mystery of its *creation*? That is miraculous - not even the greatest minds of Mars could achieve that.'

'Don't let Thamatica hear you say that or he'll take it as a challenge.' Wayland grinned and pointed farther south as the flat, oblate form of Herodotus Omega slid into view upon the inverted horizon. A waypoint alert chimed on the avionics panel.

Wayland toggled the vox.

'Drop in ten,' he said, then, to Sharrowkyn, 'You should get back to the troop compartment. This cockpit isn't really designed for a co-pilot. This isn't going to be a high-G launch, is it?'

'No, just a detachment and a glide.'

'Then I'll stay,' said Sharrowkyn, his gaze fixed on the unremarkable form of the volcano, wondering what secrets it held. 'Do you believe the Magna Mater is real?'

Wayland nodded to the looming shadow of the destroyer holding station over the landing platforms. A repulsor haze blurred the ground beneath it, and clashing vortices of gravitational force surrounded it in a spinning cloud of dust and razored fragments.

The Sons of Horus believe it,' he said. 'That is enough for me.'

Sharrowkyn nodded.

'Detachment in three... two... one... Release.'

There was no thunder of launch rails or shuddering scream of ramjets. No boom of disengaging docking clamps, just the distant tremor of tethers retracting into the Storm Eagle's hull. Gravity shifted a heartbeat to the

left, and the gunship drifted into the Lunar void carried clear by a gentle viff of manoeuvring jets and the rotation of the torpedo launch facility. Borne outwards and down by a combination of weak gravity and thrust, the Storm Eagle rotated on its long axis and tilted its nose upward.

Sharrowkyn's breath caught in his throat as sunlight flared on the canopy, and an armoured grey orb hove into view. Its surface was mottled brown and steel-dust grey, with volatile patches of sulphurous yellow drifting in the upper atmosphere. Swirls of storms were already developing over the northern hemisphere, and spots of light - traitor war fleets taking up bombardment positions - glittered like fireflies in high orbit.

'Terra,' breathed Sharrowkyn.

The Throneworld: humanity's birthrock and cardinal world of the Imperium.

World of legend, where his species had first crawled from the ocean so many millions of years ago. Where life had first looked up at the starry night.

First with wonder, then intrepidity, before, finally, ambition.

'Even at bay, it's beautiful,' said Wayland.

'I saw a painting by Serena d'Angelus once,' said Sharrowkyn. 'I mean, it was a pict render of it, but her colours were like nothing I had ever seen. I know little of beauty beyond the play of shadow on darkness, but even to my eyes it was beautiful. It was called *Terra Gaia* and was said to be what the Throneworld looked like back when it was known as Earth. *A blue-green orb, radiant with life and wonder...*

'*...before the choking breath of its endless forges brought life to the edge of extinction'*, finished Wayland. 'Yes, I know the piece.'

'I wish I had known Terra when it had colour like that,' said Sharrowkyn as the contested planet slid out of view. 'It must have been wondrous.'

5

Landing
The Sibylline Oracle
Moon-blooded

Herodotus Omega filled the horizon, its trench-like caldera frozen and its magma heart long since extinct. Many of the Lunar volcanos had been brought back to life by the core-drills of Martian geoformers, but Herodotus Omega had, for unknown reasons, remained cold and dead.

Little could be gleaned of what they might expect to find within from the meagre records available. With the *Cthonian Scion* so close, Wayland didn't dare risk an active surveyor sweep or attempt a penetration of whatever remained of the Luna noospheric network. The *Sisypheum's* cogitators listed Herodotus Omega only as an abandoned research site, but those records were over two centuries old and likely out of date, so were next to valueless.

Passive surveyors detected scores of vessels charting leisurely circuits far overhead, and numerous, seemingly random surveyor pulses. None of them were directed at the surface.

The only threat that truly mattered was the *Cthonian Scion*.

Wayland kept his attention split between the threat board and the view beyond the canopy.

The traitor destroyer wasn't actively surveying the local area but all it would take was one glitch of the Storm Eagle's damaged systems, or one lousy interaction with the endless drift of tumbling debris fouling an engine to alert the machine-spirits of the enemy auspex.

If that happened, this mission was over.

Destruction would follow detection, as sure as day followed night.

The Storm Eagle was now a glider, descending on a gently curving arc towards the looming form of Herodotus Omega. Wayland had kept the *Sisypheum* concealed in the launch facility's wreckage long enough that the Storm Eagle was likely below any local survey nets, or the watchful eyes of any Lunar auspex sites that hadn't already been destroyed.

Sharrowkyn flinched as the avionics panel chimed with faint warnings.

A rotating sine wave jumped on the brass-rimmed slate as low-grade emissions washed over the gunship. Burbling static hissed from the panel, followed by a squall of binaric pops and screeches.

'Don't worry,' said Wayland, sensing his reaction. 'They're just auspex ghosts. Trapped echoes bouncing from the crater walls.'

Sharrowkyn craned his neck to scan the horizon, searching for any sign that another ship had them locked in its sights and was even now preparing to blast them from the sky.

He saw nothing, but wasn't that always the way of it?

The old-timers always said it was the strike you never saw coming that killed you.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

'No, but given the density of the orbital traffic around Luna, it seems likely.'

Sharrowkyn Wayland was now understood enough about auspex-craft to know Wayland was probably right, but the crackling hisses issuing from the panel felt like more than just echoes. There was something oddly predatory to them, like the malicious purring of a felid toying with its prey before delivering the crippling blow. But the sound faded and the jumping sine wave on the slate returned to its safe, rippling line.

He let out a breath and said, 'Where do you plan to set down?'

'At the end of the valley,' said Wayland, pointing to the north-eastern flank of Herodotus Omega, where the sharply defined shadow of a deep chasm approached the lower haunches of the volcano. 'From the orbital picts I took, it looks like there's an unfinished geothermal venting station built into the dome's flank.

'Unfinished?'

'So it appears,' said Wayland. 'If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say the Mechanicum originally planned to reignite the volcano, but the work was never completed.'

"Why not?'

"Who can say?' replied Wayland.

A Storm Eagle was a heavy assault gunship that could transport up to twenty Space Marines into the heart of a battle. Its armour was rugged and durable, and its weapons normally packed a punch far beyond its relatively small size.

Tyro scanned the numerous empty seats around him with a deep sense of melancholy.

He remembered this ship filled with warriors, the midnight black and burnished silver of their battleplate gleaming and bedecked with oaths of moment.

How proud they had been. How noble.

He remembered gut-churning drops through volatile atmospheres, thundering runs through enemy flak, steel and fire as hulls ripped open and seeing a sky filled with explosions. Given the wounds he had suffered at the hands of Alpharius on Eirene Septimus, he ought to be confined to the apothecarion, but this was a moment who every one of them had to dig deep into what made them sons of Ferrus Manus.

Wayland and Thamatica had helped him don his armour, a time consuming and painful process, but it felt good to be clad in iron once more. The war-plate compensated for the worst of his wounds, but Tyro knew he was entering this fight with his body nigh broken.

Appropriate, he thought.

Some among the guerrilla forces fighting in the hidden spaces between the major engagements of the war against Horus had taken to calling themselves warriors of the Shattered legions. Tyro had not liked the term upon first hearing it, believing it diminished their capabilities and cohesion. That warriors of the Iron Tenth could ever be described as shattered sat poorly with him, but as time had gone on, he had come to see it for what it truly meant.

You may break and bum us, but still we rise.

Tyro's eyes slid over his fellow warriors, as ragged and ill-tempered a group of survivors as any commander had known. He rose from his armoured grav-seat and moved down the compartment, pausing beside Ignatius Numen to rap the knuckles of his gauntlet upon the warrior's dented and offset shoulder guard.

'I should upbraid you for the poor condition of your armour.'

Numen looked up, uncertain, deaf to what Tyro had just said.

Tyro moved on, lifting Tarsa's bolter from his hands and turning it over with a judgemental eye. The eagle-stamped magazine was chipped and dented, the trigger guard snapped off. He handed it back to the Salamander and said, 'I would assign you punishment duty for the unrepaired damage to your weapon.'

Stopping in front of Thamatica, Tyro examined the configuration of his grenades and ammunition. 'And as for you, Iron Father... What battlefield role is your load out designed for?'

'For whatever awaits us on the surface,' said Thamatica. 'We have little left with which to fight in any formally prescribed manner.'

Tyro nodded and turned to face his Legion brothers, marking each of them in turn. As a captain, he had led the warriors of the Iron Tenth for over a century, fighting from the fringes of the Solar System all the way to Isstvan V. He had seen courage beyond anything the most fanciful retelling of a remembrancer could invent.

Yet that paled in comparison to the courage of the men arrayed before him in this moment.

'On any normal day, I would censure every one of you,' he began. 'But this is not a normal day. Since Isstvan V, we have known no normal days. Since that black day of betrayal, we have come far, risked much and lost more. We have travelled into the realm of monsters to face our greatest foes, and we have hurt them. Like Taliansa of ancient Medusa, we lanced the belly of the great dragon and left a trail of its blood for others to follow, slowing it and weakening it in readiness for the death blow. It has been a long, dark and bloody road, brothers. We have seen comrades fall, one by one, but we have never faltered.'

Tyro paused before continuing, seeing Ulrach Branthan at the tar end of the troop compartment, watching him with pain-filled eyes.

'This will be our last mission together,' said Tyro, 'and no matter what happens, know that I am prouder than I have ever been to have known you and fought alongside you.'

The assembled warriors nodded solemnly. They were grateful tor the truth of his sentiment, but no one gave a rousing response or hammered a fist to the chest at his words.

Too much blood had been spilled and too many friends lost along the way for that.

Tyro marched between them to take a seat close to Branthan. The grav-seats were too small for the transformed captain's armoured bulk. He simply stood, hunched over at the end of the compartment, like the statue of some grotesque god at the nave of a heathen fane. Garuda sat over his head in the stowage rack, its head folded under one wing as though it were asleep.

'Fine words. Captain Tyro,' said Branthan. 'Though they were laden with a sense of finality. Do you think we will fail?'

'These men have triumphed against impossible odds time and time again,' said Tyro.

'That's not an answer,' said Branthan, reading the undertow in Tyro's words.

'I know,' said Tyro. 'But win or die, this *will* be our last fight.'

The Lunar landscape rose to meet them, but Sharrowkyn found it hard to gauge just how high they were. The rugged grey landscape was without defining characteristics to give it scale, and what few features there were offered no clue to their true size.

They could have been a thousand metres above the ground or a hundred.

The threat display continued to pop and whistle with a strange doggerel of electronic noise.

The gentle bulge of Herodotus Omega filled the canopy, its distance likewise impossible to accurately measure by sight alone. Its flanks were smooth silver, its peak ridged with glittering lights that might be structures or marker beacons. Distortion from the *Cthonian Scion's* grav-wash rippled the top of the extinct volcano, and billowing clouds of Lunar dust haloed the summit like mountain mist.

'Bringing her down,' said Wayland, easing the Storm Eagle into a curving turn to starboard. The movement was sluggish and heavy. Without thrusters, the gunship was simply a mass of metal falling gracefully through a low-G environment.

'How are you planning to land this thing without thrusters?' said Sharrowkyn.

'Once we're in the canyon, I'll risk some low-level bursts,' said Wayland.

'Enough to set us down in one piece, though it will still be an... interesting landing.'

Sharrowkyn had experienced enough hostile landings, under-fire evacs and burning intercepts Wayland had defined simply as interesting to know that this would be only fractionally better than going down in flames.

'I'll brace for impact then,' he said, turning to head back to the troop compartment.

'That might be wise,' agreed Wayland.

Before Sharrowkyn moved, a furious wail erupted from the vox. The sine wave he'd seen earlier on the emissions slate suddenly burst into life. Then, it had been jumpy, its strength varying wildly, but now it was a constant blare of energy coming straight at them.

'Something knows we're here,' he said.

Wayland didn't respond, but drove the control column forward, pushing them into a steep, almost vertical dive. Sharrowkyn gripped the sides of his pilot's compartment, hating the lack of control he always felt when his fate was in the hands of others.

'What is it?' said Sharrowkyn.

'Hunters,' replied Wayland.

'From where?'

'I don't know yet. Let me process.'

'Process faster,' said Sharrowkyn, watching the ground rushing up to meet them. He hoped Wayland had a better idea of their altitude. The jumping sine wave flattened, becoming a single, shrieking line that surely meant that whatever auspex was hunting them had found them.

'It's trying to fix our position,' said Wayland.

'What is? The Cthonian Scion?'

'I don't think so. I don't recognise the frequency type.'

The ground rolled. Silver and black inverted as the ground became the sky.

Sharrowkyn caught a glimpse of something to their port rear quarter as Wayland jinked the gunship in a plunging dive. Too fast to see clearly a thing of brass and silver. Spider-like and with too many hooked limbs A machine of some sort, a predator-drone or hybrid fighter craft perhaps.

Wayland pushed power to the engines, thoughts of stealth forgotten as the ground closed in. Sharrowkyn lost sight of their pursuer as the force of

Wayland's dive threw him against the fuselage. He felt the punch of high-G in his gut and his vision greyed for an instant. The Storm Eagle shuddered, and the sound of groaning metal ran its length.

The Iron Hands had maintained the gunship over the years as best they could, but with the limited resources available to them, the repairs of battle damage had been ad hoc at best. Welded seams split with the violence of the manoeuvre. Sparks spilled from a ruptured conduit, and warning bells echoed from the troop compartment behind them.

Sharrowkyn felt the juddering tear of something coming loose from the hull.

The darkness of the shallow canyon enfolded them, the shadows stark and inviting.

Wayland jinked the Storm Eagle to the side, ramming power back into the engines as the signal strength from the hunter-killer machine shrieked.

The altimeter spun crazily as Wayland pushed them closer to the dirt.

Jagged outcroppings and tank-sized boulders flashed past the canopy, insanely close.

Suddenly, Sharrowkyn knew exactly how close to the ground they were.

The avionics panel sputtered, and a crackling voice spat from the vox.

'*Come to heading zero three seven*,' it said, croaking as if formed by a throat parched from a lifetime in the desert. '*Then an your thrust and drop ten metres on my mark if you want to live*.'

'What the...?' began Sharrowkyn.

Wayland didn't argue, but simply nudged the control column as instructed.

The Storm Eagle banked sharply into a branch canyon, much narrower than before, and Sharrowkyn wanted to squeeze himself smaller. No warrior of the Raven Guard was claustrophobic, but this was threading the eye of a needle with a seventy-ton aircraft at high speed.

The sine wave bottomed out, a low, flat line of a constant signal

'It's locked on,' said Sharrowkyn.

Wayland grunted as he fought to manoeuvre, but the canyon walls were too narrow, the ground too close.

'I have nowhere to go,' he said.

Sharrowkyn peered through the canopy, eyes narrowing as he picked out something ahead.

Something that shouldn't be there.

A lone figure standing on a raised bluff of rock. Wreathed in shadows so deep even he couldn't pick out any details beyond a chromium helmet that gleamed silver like a crescent moon Something long and slender snapped into position at its shoulder.

‘*Now*,’ scratched the voice. '*Drop*.'

Again, Wayland didn't argue, nudging the stick forward and cu ting the engines. No sooner had the prow dipped than the device at the figure's shoulder bloomed with pale smoke and cherry-red fire.

Sharrowkyn ducked involuntarily as a dart-shaped missile flashed over the Storm Eagle, its blue-hot jet wash blistering the gunship's canopy as it passed within two metres. Sharrowkyn expected to see a reflected flash of detonation or feel the pressure wave of an explosion, but nothing came.

'Everyone brace!' yelled Wayland as the Storm Eagle made an interesting landing on the Lunar surface.

The gunship's prow was crumpled, its spine buckled and the fuselage split open all along its length. An outcropping of rock had gouged a tear in one wing and spun the craft around, leaving it listing like a beached whale in a pale cloud of dust. The right engine cowling leaked fumes and coolant, while the left hung by threads of cabling and a seam of blackened metal.

The warriors of the *Sisypheum* staggered from the hole torn in the hull where the rear assault ramp used to be, their dark armour paled by hanging Lunar panicles.

Cadmus Tyro was first from the wreckage, moving with pained steps and his bolter at the ready as he scanned the deep furrow of their descent in search of attackers. The darkness overhead was streaked with light, and explosions of dust billowed on the upper walls of the canyon as falling debris impacted. Luckily, the angle of its descent and the depth of the canyon kept the worst of it from impacting around them.

Ignatius Numen followed an instant later, his volkite cannon held out before him, the barrel crackling with barely contained energies. Prater Thamatica and Atesh Tarsa flanked him, and Ulrach Branthan came next, bending back part of the torn metal to emerge into the hostile Lunar atmosphere. Garuda perched on his shoulder, its head swung from side to side as though irritated at having been woken. 'What brought us down?' asked Branthan.

'I don't know,' said Tyro. 'Wayland's warning came only a second before we hit.

Branthan looked to the horizon. 'We need to move. The crash will draw the enemy's eye.'

Tyro nodded, and turned to issue orders to his fellow warriors. 'Frater head to the top of the dune ridge. Keep watch on our surroundings, passive auspex only. Numen, gather up the ammunition still in the gunship. Tarsa, go forward and check on Sharrowkyn and Wayland'

The Salamander nodded and headed around to the buried prow of the gunship.

Numen didn't move, his gaze fixed on the tops of the canyon walls.

'Numen, do as he says,' said Branthan.

The veteran nodded curtly and lumbered back inside the gunship. Anger touched Tyro at Numen's flagrant deferment to Branthan, but now wasn't the time for a contest of wills between captains.

Tyro's eyes narrowed as he saw a patina of frost crawling across Branthan's grey skin.

Exposed to the full force of the sun's radiation, a Lunar day could reach temperatures of up to two hundred degrees. At night, or in the shadow of a canyon as they were now, it was registering at one hundred and ninety-five degrees below zero. Insulated and reflective suits had kept the earliest Lunar pioneers safe, but Ulrach Branthan's flesh was exposed to the lethal cold.

'How are you enduring this temperature?' asked Tyro. 'The flesh should be freezing solid on your bones.'

Branthan shrugged, the movement unnatural.

'Ulrach,' pressed Tyro. 'Answer me.'

At first, he thought Branthan was going to ignore him, but then the captain spoke in a voice that was unlike his normal default-aggressive tone. If anything, Branthan sounded *vulnerable*, a trait never normally associated with a captain of the Iron Hands.

'Atesh Tarsa told me the Heart of Iron had... *changed* me,' said Branthan. 'My physiology, the functioning of my organs.'

'Should I be concerned?'

'About what?'

'About what else it might have changed,' said Tyro.

'What are you suggesting?' snapped Branthan, any sense of vulnerability evaporating in the face of Tyro's words.

'Since leaving stasis, your mental state could be described as...*erratic*.'

'Are you questioning my loyalty, Cadmus?'

'No, never that,' said Tyro. 'But none of us know the true nature of the Heart of Iron. We don't know who made it or what changes its creators intended for it to work. That should concern us both.'

'Dedicate your efforts to killing traitors and you will have no concerns, Captain Tyro.'

Thamatica's voice hissed over the vox.

'*Movement*,' said the Iron Father. '*One figure, coming in low along the furrow of our landing.'*

*'*Can you identify*?*'

'*Not yet.*'

'You have it covered?'

'*Of course.*'

The Lunar dust hung thick in the low gravity, masking movement. Tyro squinted, his auto-senses crackling with static as they tried to sort true images from ghost-images.

A figure stepped into view.

Its hunched shoulders were draped in a voluminous russet cloak, ragged like a burned wing, and a long-barrelled weapon of weathered bronze was mounted at its shoulder, rotated back on its mount to the safe position.

The figure wore a gleaming silver helmet, and a wire-wound staff of cables and jangling charms held in its left hand looked like sonic thing a tribal shaman might carry. Its body was insulated within a series of heavy thermal bandages, looped around its body and upper limbs - two at each shoulder, two at the waist - in a repeating angular pattern, like an ancient, mummified queen of Gyptus.

Queen, because what body plan was visible of the figure was unmistakably female.

'Is that a gene-witch?' said Tyro, pulling his boiler in tight to his shoulder.

'I don't know,' answered Branthan. 'I have never seen one before.' The arm that had once belonged to Brother Bombastus came up, and the flex-steel ammo belt of the storm bolter clattered as it fed oversized shells into the weapon.

One of the figure s hands clutched a disturbingly organic collection of biomechanical, tentacle-like limbs, which were in turn attached to the body of a ridged and segmented thing she was dragging behind her like a hunter returning with a prize kill. To Tyro, it looked like the bastard offspring of a spider and a squid.

Garuda pushed off Branthan's shoulder, its beak opening and closing, screeching in silent hostility.

'That's far enough,' said Branthan. The figure looked up, as though only now aware of their presence. 'Identify yourself!'

A grating wheeze, like rusty spars of metal being dragged across an iron deck, issued from beneath the figure's helmet.

'You come to *my* world and demand to know who *I* am?'

She kept coming hauling the machine carcass behind her.

'This demersal-splicer almost latched on to your craft,' she said. 'Lucky for you I still had a low-yield e-mag eh? It's one of our uglier creations, this. Would've slaved your avionics system to its control and flown you into a cliff. That'd be a wreck you wouldn't be walking out of, I can tell you!'

Crackling traceries of violet light flickered across the segmented surfaces of the splicer.

Haywire, thought Tyro. The downed machine wasn't dead, just paralysed.

Thamatica moved parallel to her, his aim never wavering from the beacon of her silver skull. If she so much as twitched in a hostile manner, the Iron Father would put a mass-reactive through her brain •Identify yourself!' ordered Branthan again, as the figure kept coming.

The gene-witch lifted her staff, and every weapon snapped to her. 'Kill me, and I'll make this machine scream loud enough the Sons of Horus will hear it with their own flesh ears,' she said.

'Who are you?' demanded Tyro.

'I know who it is,' said Sabik Wayland, coming around the flanks of the downed gunship.

Nykona Sharrowkyn and Atesh Tarsa had to hold him upright, as the lower portion of the Iron Father's right leg was missing below the middle of his thigh. Tattered shreds of meat and metal hung from the crude seal of a synth-skin dressing.

'Bad landing,' said the gene-witch.

'I've had better,' agreed Wayland. 'But I can get it to fly again.'

'Doubt it,' said the figure. 'Came down hard.'

'No thanks to you.'

'What's going on, Wayland?' said Branthan, without taking his aim from the silver-helmed figure.

'Who is that?'

'Put your guns away,' said Wayland. 'That is Ta'lab Vita-37, and she just saved our lives.'

The warriors of the Sisypheum crash land on Luna.

6

The Paths Below Not Meant to Be Change of Plans

The gene-witch tilted her head back to scan the light-streaked sky.

'What are you looking for?' asked Tyro.

'Your fleet,' said Ta'lab Vila-37. 'Squadrons of attack ships in formation. A lone warship with city-levelling ordnance. Something that tells me you heard my message and took it seriously.'

'We heard it,' said Tyro, 'but the only things like that in orbit are traitor ships.'

'So it's just you?'

'It's just us.'

'Then how do you intend to destroy Herodotus Omega? My message was specific, yes? Wipe it clean of life.'

'We are Space Marines,' said Branthan. 'We can destroy anything, and we do not need starships to do it.'

'So sure of yourself.' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'That always was your kind's flaw. Those who embrace certainty and reject doubt are ones we should have feared. We should have seen it back then. Should have seen it and refused to comply... That's the truth of it.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 shrugged and spun her staff around, then sheathed it over her shoulder.

She dropped the coiled tentacle-cables of the demersal-splicer and said, 'Never liked these bio-constructs. Vicious things with delusions of grandeur and a sadistic streak. Didn't do a damn thing but slow Lupercal's curs by a minute or less anyway.'

The gene-witch unsettled Tyro in a way he could not articulate, and it took a measure of self-restraint he hadn't known he possessed to let her approach unharmed.

He tried to rationalise it as just his war-posture in the face of an unknown entity, but part of him knew there was more to it than that. The gene-witches were an ancient, potent force, and rumours of their existence went back to a time when the secret knowledge they had possessed was thought to be magic.

"You are Ta'lab Vita-37?' asked Branthan.

She stopped and looked at him curiously.

'I am Ta'lab Vita-37. Daughter of the Moon. Child of Luna. Who are you?'

'Ulrach Branthan, captain of the Tenth Legion.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 looked him up and down. 'And what are you? Something worse than even we made. And we made nightmares...'

She didn't wail for an answer and turned to Tyro. 'And you? Who are you?'

'Cadmus Tyro.'

'Iron Hands,' said Ta'lab Vita-37, turning to scan the rest of the warriors and seeing Atesh Tarsa and Nykona Sharrowkyn. 'But not all of you.'

'Not all of us,' agreed Tyro. 'The infamy at Isstvan V brought brothers of many Legions together, and the fighting since then has forged our brotherhood in iron.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 nodded and reached up to snap a frozen droplet of blood from his armour. She held it to the reflective surface of her helmet, and Tyro's visor detected radiant heat emanating from its surface. As the blood began to melt she smeared it over where her mouth would have been if she'd had any features to discern. Cursive forms of light played under the helmet's surface, crescents and loops of helical spirals.

'Tenth Legion. Third generation. Medusan-born,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Blood type AXR positive theta. Part of the Omnia-Schiaparelli stratum. High concentrations of the Stallix genotype, a modification of the *garjana* generation-pairings. Too high, really. Can lead to a predisposition for pain-induced psycho-trauma. But I expect you already know that.'

'What are you talking about? What does any of that mean?'

'It means we bred you all to be resilient,' said Ta'lab Vita-37, 'but you exhibit levels I haven't seen in a long time. Put a bolt through *your* skull

and I think you might still get up, eh?'

'We are the Iron Tenth,' said Branthan. 'We endure pain. It is what we do.'

'There's truth in that,' agreed Ta'lab Vita-37, 'but your Legion gene-code is concentrated beyond what we advised. Your sire always did like to push things farther than He ought.'

'Our sire? You mean Ferrus Manus?' said Branthan.

'No,' said Ta'lab Vita-37, turning to face the Iron Father. 'Your other sire. The one who sent His wolves to first yoke us to His terrible ambition.'

Tyro's anger simmered just below the surface, and he saw it mirrored in the tension of his battle-brothers.

'To speak such words while the Throneworld is besieged is a sure and certain way to find death.' said Branthan.

Ta'lab Vita-37 regarded him quizzically, and shook her head.

'So fragile,' she said with a throaty wheeze that might have been a chuckle. 'Another side effect of hyper-aggressive masculine traits. Time is against us, and you still look to find fault in warm air passing over my lips.'

Tyro felt Branthan's fury ratchet up a notch, and fought to quell his own.

After all, she was right. Time was the enemy now.

'The Magna Mater, where is it?'

Ta'lab Vita-37 shook her head, somehow managing to look contrite and dejected without so much as a single facial feature.

'I bore its burden for so long, alone and hidden from my sisters. I could not take my ease with them or find succour at any of the wellsprings, for Heliosa-54 made sure every scrap of me was erased for fear I would be revealed and taken. My sisters forgot me. The moon herself forgot me. But I kept it safe, bound to Luna, but passing unseen in the cracks of existence and perception.'

She sank to her knees, and Tyro saw the immense depths of sadness within her.

'I kept it with me for two centuries and more,' she continued. 'Until my flesh and mind could bear the toll of solitude no longer. Heliosa-54 had tasked me, you see? Tasked me with keeping it safe. Close, but far from those who would misuse it. I could not do that if my body failed. I needed to rest, to regenerate in the healing light of the wellsprings, but I could not take the Magna Mater with me for fear its power would reveal it. So I

reopened the secret vaults within the gene-labs of Herodotus Omega, vaults that were rightly condemned and long ago sealed. I hid the Magna Mater deep and wove unbreakable seals about them while I slumbered.'

'Let me guess,' said Tyro. 'Those seals weren't as unbreakable as you thought.'

'Even on Luna, it seems the rot of treachery runs deep,' said Ta'lab Vita-37 sadly 'As I regenerated, building the strength to continue my duty, enemy hunters learned of my lone vigil and tracked me to my refuge. Corrupted cybernetics almost took me, but they underestimated the power of a gene-maiden, even an old and frail one. I unmade them, and fled into the silver oceans, using the old ways to send a message of desperation into the void.'

'And we have answered your call, so what would you have us do?' said Branthan.

Ta'lab Vita-37 aimed her staff in the direction of the volcano.

'Time is short,' she said. 'Renegade Martian tech-priests are using a degenerative viral sentience to undo the gene-seals I placed upon the vaults within Herodotus Omega.'

'How long do we have before they break in?' asked Tyro.

'Five of the seals have already succumbed, the sixth is almost gone, and it is only a matter of time until the seventh seal is no more and the Sons of Horus will be within.'

'If the Sons of Horus hold the main entrance, how do we get inside?' asked Tyro.

'Main entrance?' cackled Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Your kind is always so literal.'

Leaving Wayland and Thamatica to try to get the Storm Eagle airborne, Ta'lab Vita-37 led the others deeper into the canyon. Sharrowkyn gripped Wayland's arm as he left. The Iron Father's face was pale, but he gave no sign of any pain from the leg he had lost in the crash. He had already bound a broken stanchion to the stump to act as a crutch, using cable and insulation material pulled from the torn fuselage.

'Be safe, brother,' said Wayland.

'You too, brother,' said Sharrowkyn. unable to shake a feeling of grim premonition.

'I'll have this flying before you get back, mark my words.' Sharrowkyn

had seen aircraft in worse states keep flying, but not for long, and few of them ever got back in the air once they were down

'I don't doubt it,' he said.

That farewell had been two hours and fifteen kilometres ago.

Sharrowkyn scouted ahead of the others as they pushed along the canyon towards the unfinished venting station built into the haunches of the volcano. Dust fragments drifted down like ashen rain into the canyon, as well as larger pieces of fused metal smashed from orbit. Sharrowkyn had passed a number of bodies too, but hadn't stopped to examine them.

Occasional flashes of secondary detonations in orbit, or the streaks of burning debris carving a fiery line across the sky, briefly illuminated the canyon floor. Ten metres behind, Ignatius Numen swept the ground before him with his volkite. The veteran had fought with Sharrowkyn long enough to know the Raven Guard warrior was in no danger from any shots he might fire. Atesh Tarsa and Branthan flanked Ta'lab Vita-37, while Cadmus Tyro provided rear security. Garuda circled above him, keeping below the lip of the canyon. It irked Sharrowkyn that the bird was keeping pace with him, but the bird went where it wanted, and nothing anyone could do or say to it made any difference.

Sharrowkyn moved silently, his steps lighter than air, barely disturbing the dust and leaving no mark of his passing. Moving this way was instinctual to him.

The darkness in the canyon was deep and comforting, even if he didn't know this world's shadows. Their nuances were unknown to him, but they welcomed him nonetheless. To those not trained by the Shadowmasters, all such umbra were alike, but Sharrowkyn knew better.

He had been born to the shadows and they had raised him, nurtured and taught him, like a child raised by beasts in the forest. He knew their ways, and they his.

Ta'lab Vita-37 had told him to look for a section of canyon wall with three teardrop-shaped impact craters in a pattern resembling an elongated spear tip aimed at the dead volcano.

Sharrowkyn's eyes were in constant motion, but he had seen nothing resembling such a formation, and they were getting dangerously close to the enemy auspex net his passive auto-senses were detecting.

Three hundred meters later, he halted as a bloom of light from an

explosion threw the eastern wall into sharp relief. And there they were - three impact craters, the result of meteors having struck the canyon wall at the precise angle to form a spear tip, the pattern entirely natural yet completely distinct.

Sharrowkyn stepped from the shadows, an act that would tell Numen they had reached their destination. He hunted or any sign of something man-made but could see nothing location. A sliver of the volcano's summit was just visible between the narrow wall, and through the veil of drifting fragments.

Ta'lab Vita-37 and the others approached, and Sharrowkyn indicated the impact craters in the wall.

"You have good eyes,' Ta'lab Vita-37 said.

“You should know,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Your kind enhanced them.'

'That we did, Raven Guard, irreducible complexity be damned.' she replied.

'So why are we here? What do these marks signify?'

'That we have our way in,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'Where?' demanded Branthan.

'If there's a way in here, it's well hidden, said Sharrowkyn.

'Your eyes are keen, but you don't see everything, Raven,' said Ta'lab Vita-37,

The gene-witch approached the dark rock of the canyon wall and set her staff of charms and cables against it. More lights flickered beneath the surface of her helm, and previously invisible seams opened in the rock, seams Sharrowkyn knew with absolute certainty that no Shadowmaster or high fabricatus of the Mechanicum would ever have found.

'Two hundred years I have travelled the moon, beyond sight and out of mind,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Do you really think I don't know all her secret ways?'

The cavern within the canyon wall was rough-hewn, its walls curved and scored with napped patterns that made Sharrowkyn feel as if he stood within some giant sea creature's shell. He ran his finger along the inner walls, feeling repetition in the patterns, as if the rock had been dug by the rhythmic gestures of something desperate to claw its way out.

That impression was only reinforced by the sight of an exposed sheet of metal on the far wall of the cave, a portion of ductwork revealed by

excavations into the rock. A ragged hole had been cut into the metal from within by what looked like a thermal lance, and the portion excised from the duct lay on the ground.

'What is this?' Sharrowkyn asked.

'A segment of venting ductwork that leads from inside and eventually comes out high on the flanks of the volcano,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'This our way in?'

'Yes.'

Sharrowkyn leaned cautiously into the duct, feeling the passage of warm, ionised air drifting from somewhere deep inside the mountain.

'This leads to the vaults?'

'It does,' confirmed Ta'lab Vita-37. 'To a sealed storage facility.'

'Wait,' said Atesh Tarsa, kneeling by the edge of the hole cut in and consulting the readout on his narthecium. "What are these venting? What machinery is this ducting connected to?'

'This ductwork is part of the radiation filtration system,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'Radiation?' said Tyro. 'How bad is it, Tarsa?'

'The levels are below lethal, but still significant,' said Tarsa.

'A radiation filler?' said Tyro. "Why do you need a radiation filtration system that requires ducting of this size? Didn't you say there were gene-labs in here?'

'This facility was built upon one of the original Koenig Alpha atomic waste sites.'

'*What*? Why would you build a gene-lab on an atomic waste site?'

'The containment systems were more than adequate to render the internal environment sterile,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'But the proximity to a waste site would convince anyone who thought to look this way that no work of any import could possibly be carried out here.'

'What work was being carried out here?' asked Tyro.

Ta'lab Vita-37 hesitated before answering. 'Highly secret research that was intended to become a new branch of Legion genetics, but which was abandoned when it only produced freaks and monsters. We destroyed them, and this place was shut down long ago.'

'And this is where you hid the Magna Mater? asked Tyro.

'Yes. It is a place of forgotten echoes now.'

'Well that doesn't sound ominous at all,' said Sharrowkyn.

7

No More to Give
Infiltration
Too Late

Wayland leaned back in his pilot's seat and gritted his teeth against the pain.

It raced around his body in rivers of fire from his severed leg, suffusing every fibre of his being with almost paralysing agony. His armour had long since exhausted its supply of balms in the years since Isstvan V, but not all the pain he was feeling was his own.

Thick cables ran from his gauntlet into an exposed conduit of wires he'd unscrewed from the interior of the Storm Eagle's fuselage. He felt the agony of the machine-spirit at the heart of the gunship, its fury and its torment at being grounded.

It overwhelmed his pain, for it was the pain of desire broken on the wheel of reality.

Wayland whispered the binaric catechisms of repair and restoration to soothe its broken spirit. The machine's pain was hideous, and he felt its wounded soul on the verge of dissipating into the ether. He reached for it, but it turned at bay, screeds of binary lashing out at him.

The connection between the gunship and Wayland was severed with a screeching roar of fury from the vox, and Wayland's eyes snapped open, his skin lathered in icy sweat.

He disconnected from the avionics panel, his movements clumsy with pain and residual echoes of his conjoined consciousness. He pulled himself from the pilot's seat and limped back to the compartment.

Frater Thamatica knelt by the dormant form of the demersal-splicer

Ta'lab Vita-37 had brought down. Its appearance bore few hallmarks of Imperial craft, and its grotesque, cephalopodic body possessed a more organic form than Wayland was used to seeing. Ever the tinkerer, Thamatica had the mechanised arms of his servo-harness prodding circuitry within an access panel he'd prised open.

The Iron Father usually preferred to work manually, but such was the scale of repairs needed to render the Storm Eagle flyable that he had been forced to dig a servo-harness from its stowage bay. The welder tips on its fusion torch arms still glowed red with heat.

'What are you doing with that?' asked Wayland.

'Investigating.' said Thamatica without looking up. 'I've never seen technology like this before. It would be a shame not to at least take a look at it. The MIU links are extraordinary, verging on the edge of true machine autonomy. Given free rein, this could fly a fleet of gunships on its own. If I can just disengage these inhibitors, I could link it with-'

'The Storm Eagle,' interrupted Wayland. 'Walk me through it.'

Now Thamatica looked up, and the multiple arms of the servo-harness folded into their collapsed forms on his back

'The fuselage was split in so many places I lost count, and a great many of the control surfaces are so badly damaged that it will be almost impossible to manoeuvre effectively. The landing gear is shattered and the fuel tanks are all but empty.'

'What's your prognosis? Is it fit to fly?'

Thamatica said, 'I've sealed up all our wounds and realigned what I can, but without a Legion graving dock and a squadron of servitors, I fear this will be its final flight.'

Wayland nodded and lowered himself into one of the compartment's armoured bucket seats. Pain from his leg was burning through his endurance, but he forced it into a sealed box in his mind. He was an Iron Hand; pain was part of the journey.

Birth to death. Flesh to Iron.

Thamatica put a hand on Wayland's shoulder and nodded to the cockpit.

'But nothing I can do to get us up in the air will matter if the machine-spirit is broken.'

'I can't reach it, Frater,' said Wayland. 'The spirit recoils from my every entreaty like a wild animal in a snare, too consumed by rage and pain to

understand I am trying to help.'

'No one has a way with the spirit of machines like you, Sabik,' said Thamatica. 'I know you can reach it. You just need to be patient with it. And all being well, we only need to be airborne long enough to return to the *Sisypheum*.'

'All being well?' snapped Wayland. 'How well have things gone for us since Isstvan V?'

'Not like you to be defeatist, Sabik.'

Wayland sighed. 'We all only have so much to give, Frater.'

Hot, irradiated fumes and radioactive dust blew along the ductwork, in levels high enough to be deadly to a mortal but harmless to the warriors of the Legions. Ta'lab Vita-37 led them through the twisting lengths of ducts, and it did not take long for them to reach the interior of the mountain.

They emerged in a storage chamber, a cold space of angle-cut stone, stacked high with construction materiel that would be used, broken machinery and the accumulated detritus of abandoned spaces. A single trapezoidal archway led deeper into the mountain.

Sharrowkyn heard the distant sounds of shouting voices, mixed with the clang of metal on metal and the idling thrum of engine's belonging to something heavy.

A transport of some kind, a trans-orbital at least.

One by one, they moved into the chamber. Cadmus Tyro and Ta'lab Vita-37 followed Sharrowkyn, then Tarsa. Ignatius Numen came next, and finally Ulrach Branthan ducked down as he entered Garuda clung to the metal at his shoulders.

'The vault is ahead,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'Should we expect to meet resistance?' asked Tyro.

'No,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'At least, not until we reach the vault chamber itself.'

Despite the gene-witch's assurances, the Space Marines moved off in perfect cover formation, each warrior protecting the other as they moved deeper into the mountain.

The interior tunnels of the volcano were faced with pressed steel, and dust and silence hung heavy over them all. They moved from junction to junction, with Ta'lab Vita-37 leading them unerringly onwards. At the

arched entrance to an opened chamber, they found barricades of collapsed gurneys and empty barrels stamped with biohazard markings. Las-burns, grenade shrapnel and bullet impacts had chewed up the walls.

'What's in there?' asked Sharrowkyn.

'The growth chambers,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Where viable subjects were hothoused and matured in gene-pods.'

'The freaks and monsters?' Sharrowkyn asked. 'Is that all that's left here?'

'No,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'We purged all the monsters the Emperor couldn't use.'

They passed through the smashed barricade and entered a vast chamber of dripping echoes and cold darkness. Long-dead machinery gathered dust on the walls, rigging chains dangled from lifter cranes, and heavy-duty cabling lay inert on the floor amid shards of broken glass.

Lined up in their thousands, like warriors at a Legion muster, were row upon row of clear-fronted gene-pods. Most were empty, but those that were not were filled with stagnant, milky residue in which hulking forms could be glimpsed through the clouded glass. It was impossible to make out their exact nature, but Sharrowkyn saw figures with transhuman bulk - but these were monstrous ogres, taller and broader than even the largest Space Marine.

Sharrowkyn kept pace with Ta'lab Vita-37 and took a moment to study the gene-witch.

'What is it you want to know?' she asked, sensing his scrutiny.

'I'm not sure,' he said. 'It's not every day you get to meet one of your creators.'

'Is that how you think of me?'

Sharrowkyn shrugged. 'Until we came to the moon I had not thought of the Selenar much at all. You were a footnote to the early histories of the drive from Terra. So little is known of you and your sect.'

'Did you pause to wonder why that might be?

'Not at all'

Ta'lab Vita-37 turned to face him, but her featureless helm gave no clue to her emotions.

'The Selenar have always existed in the cracks between perception,' she said. 'We have gone by many names and used many guises through the ages to move through the world of men - the Eleusinians, Oesirica, the

Damia, the Immacolata... The list goes on, but every name and every guise had but one purpose. Do you know that was?'

'No,' said Sharrowkyn.

'To keep our power of creation out of the hands of men.'

'Why?'

Ta'lab Vita-37 gave one of her wheezing laughs. 'Because we knew you would do what your kind always does with such a gift - you would seek to turn it into a weapon of conquest and dominance. And that's exactly what the Emperor did when He stole it front us all those years ago.'

'Stole? My understanding was that Luna and Terra fought, yes, but that when the Emperor laid out His vision for the Imperium, the Selenar willingly joined forces to see it done.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 shook her head, as though Sharrowkyn had disappointed her.

'Of course that is your understanding. To accept that everything for which you fight is built on lies, murder and theft does not fit the narrative you must craft in order to keep believing you are the heroes of this galaxy. Look at what has become of your Imperium and tell me we were not wise to keep such awesome power secret as long as we did?'

'There have been wars long before this one.'

'There have indeed, Raven Guard, but wars waged by mortals bum out m mortal spans - they do not set the galaxy ablaze,' said Ta lab Vita-37, turning to rap her over-articulated knuckles on his eagle-stamped plastron. 'When gods make war, everyone burns in the fire with them.'

Before Sharrowkyn could reply, Ta'lab Vita-37 bent double with a cry of pain.

Sharrowkyn immediately grabbed her and pulled her into cover, scanning for threats. He hadn't heard or sensed anything. The others followed his lead finding machinery and structural elements to shelter behind.

Ta'lab Vita-37 clutched her gut, sinking to her knees. But for her staff, she would have fallen to the floor. Her body spasmed, as though struck with a shock maul.

'What's happening?' asked Sharrowkyn. 'Are you hurt?'

Her chest hiked with rapid, staccato breaths.

Angry red spirals looped on the surface of her helmet.

'The seventh seal is broken,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'The traitors are in the

vault.'

Thamatica had done as much as he could with the tools and materials he had to make the Storm Eagle flyable, but even then he wasn't sure it would be enough. So many elements of its structure were beyond battlefield repair, and the constant recycling and reuse of worn-out parts over the years had finally taken its inevitable toll.

He felt reasonably confident it was structurally capable of getting airborne, but without a willing machine-spirit, it likely wouldn't remain in the air for long. Without a machine-spirit, a gunship was just tons of scrap metal.

Thamatica glanced along the troop compartment towards the cockpit, where Wayland again sought to coax the gunship's spirit back from the brink. Cables ran from his arm to the avionics panel, and pulsing communications passed back and forth between man and machine. Thamatica had offered to help, but Wayland had shaken his head.

'No,' he'd said. 'I flew this gunship out of the fires of Isstvan V. I flew it against Fulgrim's warriors and against those of Alpharius. Its spirit knows me. It trusts me. But it is wary of you.'

Thamatica couldn't blame it. Not really. The machine-spirits of the *Sisypheum* gossiped with one another, passing secret knowledge in every binaric whisper. They knew Thamatica as an...*experimenter*. As one who sought to change them.

No, Wayland was right to decline his help.

But this splicer, that was a different story entirely.

It was a fascinating piece of technology.

He'd exposed the length of its interior, and its workings were a marvel. Its roots were old, its components built from scratch without recourse to anything Thamatica recognised as an STC pattern. Its circuitry looked handmade. Bespoke. The very thought of such a thing sent a thrill of excitement through him and had given him an idea of how they might employ it, though Wayland had already decried it as too dangerous.

Its control module was dizzyingly complex, an artificial neural web with heuristic capabilities that far outstripped what they'd seen inside Garuda when he and Wayland had stripped the bird down to repair it. Ta'lab Vita-37 had said it was designed to take control of enemy aircraft in order to

crash them or take control of vital systems. An ingenious and efficient way to turn an enemy's strength against them.

'Damnation!' snapped Wayland from the cockpit.

'Still not responding?' asked Thamatica.

'No,' said Wayland, sounding exhausted. 'It's all but given up.'

The vault chamber had been carved deep into the southern haunches of the volcano, a rough circle a kilometre in diameter. It was filled with the actinic reek of burning metal and the molten heat of lascutters. Like every chamber they'd passed through, it was littered with derelict machinery, broken loader servitors and emptied stowage bins. Sharrowkyn eased into cover behind a haphazardly stacked collection of metalled crates. Dust and fumes hung in the air in a thick fog, rendering the shapes moving through the space as blurred outlines.

The entire caldera at the volcano's summit was peeled back, and darkness of the void rippled through the energies of an integrity field The light of stars beyond was indistinguishable from the winking lights of orbital detonations and falling debris. A bulky trans-orbital without markings squatted directly below the high entrance, its engines glowing with heat, spooling up in readiness for lift-off.

A cadre of lifter servitors hauled dozens of bulky powercells on repulsor pallets up the embarkation ramp lowered beneath its aft section. Behind them, a multi-limbed tech-priest supervised a group of glitching tech-thralls in oil-stained canvas vac-suits as they loaded steaming coolant cylinders into the trans-orbital's stowage bays.

At the centre of the cavernous space was a deep, circular shaft, putting Sharrowkyn in mind of the eldar crone world they'd followed Fulgrim and Perturabo to, and the depthless pit at its heart. Two dog-toothed silo doors, each five metres thick and thirty metres in length, were raised up on either side of the shaft. Noxious steam issued from below like clouds rising from some hideous underworld.

The floor around the vault opening was littered with the bodies of servitors and dark-robed lexmechanics. They were clearly dead, but their bodies jerked and twisted, purging vital fluids as the flesh rippled beneath the fabric of their robes like the surface of a restless ocean.

'What's happening to them?' asked Numen, rapping his fingers on the

stock of his volkite.

'The fail-safes on my gene-locks are not kind to those who try to break them,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'What does that mean?'

Lights flickered across Ta'lab Vita-37's helm in a pattern Sharrowkyn had come to associate with grim amusement. 'Unsuccessful attempts to break my gene-codes transfers a hyper-aggressive mutagen into the attacker that instantaneously and randomly sends their genetic order into chaos. Death is assured, and it is not painless.'

Sharrowkyn grinned in admiration. He counted at least two hundred bodies, maybe more.

However many it was, it hadn't been enough.

'You underestimated the traitors' willingness to pay any price to breach your sanctum.'

'Underestimating the depth of cruelty men possess has always been our problem,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'We can't linger here,' said Atesh Tarsa, consulting his narthecium and gesturing to the towering red silos lining the circumference of the cavernous space. 'The rad-levels are so high that even our armour won't keep us safe for long.'

Each silo was banded with yellow and black hazard stripes and marked with the unmistakable radiation symbol. Sharrowkyn was acutely reminded that this place had continued to serve as a repository of atomic waste deposited here in the moon's distant past.

'I thought you said this place was sterile,' said Ulrach Branthan, crouched awkwardly in the shadow of a heavy, tracked lifter-rig.

'During this facility's years of operation it was,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'But the filtration system has long since failed to scrub the atmosphere in any meaningful way, and this internal volume is thick with a broth of heavy metals and lethal isotopes.'

'Then let's get this thing done,' said Tyro, his fingers tightening on his bolter's grip.

'Wait,' said Sharrowkyn as growing tremors shook the ground with a deep vibration. Orange hazard lights began flashing around the edge of the vault shaft as a heavy transit-elevator ground its way up from somewhere deep below.

The tech-priest and his thralls watched in reverence as something came into view, its form obscured by reeking clouds of misty condensate.

As the ammoniac clouds dispersed into the cold of the cavern, Sharrowkyn's eyes grew wide at the sight of a monstrous servitor palanquin of flesh and metal. Wrought from the body of a hulking *migou*, its frame had been augmented with steel-jacketed limbs, chemical shunts and an MIU drive unit. Its back was artificially hunched, and brass steps had been implanted onto the meat and bone of its haunches.

A tall and willow-thin Martian adept in red and black, his true form impossible to classify but fringed with cabled limbs and surgical attachments, sat atop this grotesque palanquin on a chained harness. The migou's body was rapidly devolving into a mass of pulsing lesions and unnatural growths, splitting and reforming between laboured breaths.

The consequence of one of Ta'lab Vita-37 s fail-safes?

The necrotic texture of the migou's waxen flesh rippled beneath its many augments, and its head swayed from side to side as it brayed in pain. Tortured beyond endurance by the genetic chaos at work within its body, the creature collapsed, and its riotous anatomy poured from its mouth in a frothed soup of liquefaction. Even as Sharrowkyn watched, devolved portions of its body sought to recombine, healing and degenerating once again in the blink of an eye.

'Throne,' hissed Tarsa at the sight of the creature's death.

The magos atop the afflicted beast slid from his harness and stepped down to the cavern floor without missing a beat. The tech-priest and his entourage of thralls dropped to their knees as he turned to retrieve something from the back of the shuddering corpse.

Ta'lab Vita-37's body language instantly changed as the magos lifted down a heavy-looking case of silver steel.

Sharrowkyn thought it an unremarkable object to contain the secrets of life itself.

'Magna Mater...' hissed the gene-witch.

BOOK 3

CRONE

Death may be the greatest
of all human blessings.

8

Into Them
Iron Endures
Active Glories

The magos boarded the trans-orbital, leaving his dead mount behind. The tempo of operations increased as the mindless thralls began the last preparations for launch. The aircraft's engines pulsed with an increase in power and the fog of dust and fumes burned off at its rear.

'We can't let that ship take off,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

'Do you see any weapons capable of bringing a ship that size down?' asked Tyro.

'Then we need to get on board,' insisted the gene-witch.

'We can do that,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Then we fight our way to the cockpit.'

'How?' said Tyro. "We don't exactly look as though we belong here.'

Sharrowkyn reached down and scooped a handful of pale dust from the door and smeared it across his armour. He patted a disruptive pattern across the Legion symbol on his shoulder guard. It didn't obscure it, but it would be camouflage enough to get them close to the trans-orbital before their loyalist provenance became obvious.

'Captain Branthan, pick up a pallet crate,' said Sharrowkyn. 'Your scale might fool them into thinking you are a load-lifter or bulk servitor. The dust should conceal our insignia until we reach the embarkation ramp. Then we fight our way to the command deck.'

'I'll not hide the hand of the Tenth,' said Numen, watching Sharrowkyn dusting his armour.

'If you have another plan, let's hear it,' said Sharrowkyn, 'but we need to move now.'

Numen looked at Branthan. who nodded, and, reluctantly, the veteran began patting his own armour down with dust. He made only a cursory attempt to obscure the mailed hand at his shoulder and Sharrowkyn didn't ask him to deface his war-plate any further.

Branthan turned to lift a heavy crate while the Space Marines finished applying enough dust to obscure their identity.

Tyro nodded and said, 'Move out. Move confidently. They must think we belong here.'

Atesh Tarsa led them from cover. Patched with the pale dust, his green armour most resembled that of the sea green of the Sons of Horus, and, as poor a disguise as it was, it might buy them a few metres.

And a few metres could mean the difference between life and death.

Sharrowkyn and the Iron Hands kept moving behind Tarsa, and the Raven Guard felt every fibre of his body screaming at being so brazen. To move in the open, directly towards the enemy, was the antithesis of everything he had been taught, and went against every principle by which his Legion operated.

They moved quickly, pushing out around the edge of the central shaft towards the trans-orbital. Its engines burned a hot shade of blue, the dust swirling in spiralling thermal vortices

Sharrowkyn walked swiftly, keeping his upper body a quarter-turn away from the thralls positioned at the embarkation ramp. His hand rested on the grip of his bolter, out of sight.

He glanced behind him, seeing Tyro and Numen looking awkward in the open. So much of the fighting they had done since Isstvan had been on the fringes of the war, biting hard and falling back, moving so as not to be seen.

This approach bothered them as much as it did him.

Branthan lurched behind them, bearing a heavy crate in his outstretched arms. He kept his burden lifted high to better obscure his unnatural body. Sharrowkyn couldn't see Garuda, and just hoped the bird wasn't about to do something inexplicably stupid.

He saw the blurred outlines of the thralls turn to face them.

Their body language registered no threat. Why would it? Luna was now the dominion of their masters - they had no reason to expect any transhumans who were not Sons of Horus. One of the thralls voiced a blurt

of harsh static, a binaric yell to be heard over the growing roar of the engines. The others turned as one, the movement eerily synchronistic.

The nearest thrall shouted again, this time with the augmitter implanted in its neck.

'We bring prize to you, masters!" it said. 'Much speed.'

Sharrowkyn willed Tarsa not to answer.

Fifty metres yet separated them from the trans-orbital. Io be revealed now would leave no time to get aboard before the ramp could be closed.

The thrall stepped forward, confused. Its stunted autonomony slaved to the tech-priest already aboard the trans-orbital. It could make no decision without its masters leave, and the collar it wore winked with light as it sought orders.

Forty metres.

A shape moved into view at the top of the ramp, a robed figure with glowing augmetic eyes. No amount of dust or fog would fool those optics. The tech-priest was sure to see through their camouflage in an instant.

Thirty metres.

Sharrowkyn tightened his grip on the bolter.

His armour registered the passage of an energy wave, its machine spirits hackles raised by an interrogative sweep of an auspex. Immediately, the tech-priest stiffened, and the ventral lights on the trans-orbital began flashing as the embarkation ramp began to rise.

Sharrowkyn's muscles were already tensed, ready to explode him into action, when a blur of silver shot down through the fog and enveloped the tech-priest's head like a gleaming metal mask. Thrashing mechanical wings, razor-edged with flensing blades, sliced flesh and steel with every beat. Garuda's talons were like curved punch-daggers, gouging and tearing at the knot of cables rising from the traitorous Martian's spine. An arcing spray of jet-black fluid squirted down the embarkation ramp as the psyber-eagle's beak ripped out the tech-priest's throat.

The thralls jerked in empathetic shock, their nervous systems intrinsically linked to the physiology of their master.

'Into them!' yelled Sharrowkyn.

Tarsa put a mass-reactive through the head of the nearest thrall, then switched his aim to the second. Sharrowkyn sped forward, bringing his bolter up to his shoulder and firing a pair of expertly aimed shots that

detonated the skulls of the next two thralls.

In the face of certain death, the last four thralls threw off the shock-trauma of the tech-priest's pain and turned to run.

Two more bolter shots punched into the closest thralls and burst their unprotected bodies apart from the inside. Sharrowkyn ran for the rising embarkation ramp, his bolter now mag-locked to his thigh and a black-bladed gladius in each hand. He launched himself onto the ramp, rolling and slicing low to hack through the spine of the first thrall before spinning around to hurl his second blade.

It plunged into the back of the last thrall, buried to the hilt between its shoulder blades.

Garuda finished savaging the tech-priest's head, its beak and claws wet with black-red fluids that looked nothing like human blood.

The bird cawed and launched into the air, flying deeper into the trans-orbital.

'Where are you going?' he yelled after it, but the bird, as always, kept its counsel.

Garuda vanished, and Sharrowkyn bent to retrieve his thrown blade. He wiped it clean, looking for the mechanism to reverse the rise of the embarkation ramp as he felt a lurch in his equilibrium that told him the trans-orbital had begun to lift from the ground. 'Damn it, we're taking off.'

A screeching whine of protesting hydraulics made him look back, and he saw Ulrach Branthan holding the ramp in place as the others climbed up.

Tarsa, Numen and Tyro were already aboard, and Branthan grunted as he pulled the ramp down enough for him to step onto it surprisingly agile for something so large, he all but vaulted into the trans-orbital as it finally dusted off and the ramp locked into place.

'Move as one,' he said, shucking his arms back to load his under-slung storm bolters. 'We take this ship. Fast.'

For so valuable a prize, the trans-orbital was sparsely crewed. The warriors of the *Sisypheum* moved through its bare companionways and transits almost without resistance. Thralls and servitors for the most part manned its stations.

The thralls they killed, the servitors they spared - not for mercy's sake, but so they could continue to fly the trans-orbital.

They found the magos assigned to the craft plugged into sole bank like the grand organ of some theatrica hall. He juddered with traceries of lightning coruscating around his body, as though in the grip of a system-wide seizure.

Branthan put him down with a bolt-round through his spinal cord, and the juddering stopped. Ta'Iab Vita-37 stepped over the body and wrenched all the magos' mechadendrites and data-spikes from the machine. For good measure, she bent and extended a spike of her own from her wrist and rammed it through the fallen magos' temple.

'He was calling for help,' she said.

'Did he succeed?' asked Branthan.

Tyro swept his gaze over the numerous panels and data-slates embedded in the console.

'I can't say,' he replied. 'But we'll know soon enough if he did.'

The silver case the magos had carried out from the shaft lay next to him, and Ta'Iab Vita-37 pulled it close to her, like a mother reunited with her child after a long separation. She slid her still-wet data-spike into a slot at its side, and her entire body language changed.

'It's safe,' she said. 'They got into the vault, but they didn't try to open the Magna Mater itself. They didn't dare.'

Tarsa knelt beside Ta'Iab Vita-37, like a knight at the end of his journey before the object of his quest.

'Can... can I see it?' he said. 'We never... never thought it was real. It was a myth to us.'

'That is what we wanted you to think,' said Ta'Iab Vita-37, pulling the case away from him in an unconscious act of protection. 'A power that you could never possess needed to be reduced to allegory so you would never seek it.'

'No, I..'

'What is to stop us taking it now?' said Branthan.

'It would do you no good,' said Ta'lab Vila-37. 'It will not open for you. Or me, for that matter. Only the High Matriarch can open it.'

'And the Sons of Horus likely have her.' said Branthan.

'All the more reason to get this away from Luna,' said Tarsa.

'All the more reason to *destroy* it,' said Tyro.

Further discussion was halted as the trans-orbital lurched to the side, and

Sharrowkyn felt a ripple of atmospheric change as the lumbering aircraft passed through the integrity field, swiftly followed by the awful sound of steel grinding on rock.

'Something's wrong,' he said. 'We need to get to the bridge.'

Sharrowkyn set off at a run, following the stencilled markings on the wall that led to the bridge. A ship of war would never provide such markers, but this was a vessel designed simply to ferry cargo between a planet's surface and orbiting vessels. It wasn't designed for combat or to be held against a boarding action.

Another impact struck the craft, but Sharrowkyn easily compensated.

The approach to the bridge was a long, narrow passageway, a sole concession to possible defence. Sharrowkyn and Tyro took up positions on either side.

'In all likelihood, the pilots will just be hardwired monotasks.' said Ta'lab Vita-37. .

'We can't take that chance,' said Sharrowkyn. 'For all we know there might be another magos in there, or, worse, a legionary.'

'Or better, you mean,' said Tyro.

Sharrowkyn grinned. 'Or better.'

'On two,' said Tyro.

'One,' said Sharrowkyn.

'Two,' finished Tyro, and they broke from cover, moving fast, bolters locked on the entrance to the bridge. Branthan filled the corridor behind them, his storm bolters aimed over

The armoured door slid open, and Sharrowkyn's finger tensed on the trigger on the trigger.

Nothing came out, no storm of solid rounds or flurry of las-fire.

They reached the blast door and swept inside left and right.

Warning lights flashed and proximity alarms blared angrily

Jagged bursts of binaric cant spat from a vox-horn dangling from the avionics panel.

'Clear,' said Sharrowkyn, and Tyro echoed that confirmation.

'Throne,' said Tarsa, entering the wide bridge space and seeing what lay within.

As Ta'lab Vita-37 had predicted, the trans-orbital was crewed by a complement of hardwired monotask servitors, hybrids of men and

machine who never left their seats and only ever fulfilled one function: piloting the ship up and down, over and over in an endless loop of repetition.

A ship this size had a bridge crew of six, and all of them were dead.

The canopy and instrument panels were crimson and wet with blood spray.

Each pilot's skull had been caved in, the lid of bone peeled back ration can in a mess pack and the organ within pulped and pierced. The tops of their heads were sopping red craters, and every lurching shift of the trans-orbital's movement spilled tears of pinkish brain matter down their expressionless faces.

Garuda perched on the back of the lead pilot's grav-seat, grooming itself. Its wings, beak and claws were wet with blood. Almost no trace of the silver beneath could be seen.

'Throne,' said Tyro. 'What did you do?'

'No time for that now,' said Sharrowkyn urgently.

'What is it?' said Tyro.

'Two things,' said Sharrowkyn. 'One, with the pilots dead, we're going to crash. Two...'

He pointed through the blood-spattered canopy and said, 'Look.'

The *Cthonian Scion* was turning, its black-and-gold prow angling wards the volcano, like a sword being drawn from its scabbard. A bloom of light, tiny at this distance, detached from its launch bay and streaked across the darkness of the Lunar sky.

'Thunderhawk,' said Tyro. 'Sons of Horus.'

'The magos got his warning off,' said Sharrowkyn.

Wayland felt the body of the wounded gunship surround him.

Its pain was his pain, and it burned through his veins. It bled fire along the fibre-bundle cables that connected them, wracking his body with its many hurts. Part of him wished his body was more augmetic, so as to diminish the agony of the experience, but the greater part of him knew that not sharing the machine's suffering would dishonour its sacrifice.

The message from Sharrowkyn had been brief and to the point

Need immediate extraction. Sons of Horus inbound.

He'd watched the trans-orbital rise from the volcano's caldera, then

almost immediately sink back down into the volcano. Something was wrong, and no one was responding over the vox. Wayland I plugged straight back into the Storm Eagles cogitators.

'I know you are hurting, and I know I ask too much, but I need you to fly. More than ever. Our brothers are in harm's way and they need us in the air.'

He felt the machine's desire, felt the last of its power push back into the steel of its bones.

'Yes, *yes!* Flesh may fail, but iron endures. The *machine* endures.' he said, knowing the spirit would hear him, if not in words at least in sentiment. 'Where one exists, so too does the other. Where one endures, the other may renew. You are a predator of the iron skies, a hunter of the weak. Your wings are broken, your claws dulled, but you can yet hunt, you can yet kill your enemies.'

His words fanned the fire of the Storm Eagle's soul, a burning coal deep in its heart, but still he wondered whether it would be enough.

Thamatica had worked wonders on the gunship's frame to render it airworthy, but its spirit was all but broken, leaking into the ether with every passing second. Wayland knew machine-spirits, had bonded with them and earned their trust. In the ruins of Eskalor, he had nurtured the fading embers of a wrecked Land Raider, its spirit wounded nigh unto death, and driven it straight through the heart of the enemy lines to ultimate victory.

That spirit had endured, and it had spoken of Wayland as a friend to machines.

'What say you, brother?' asked Wayland. 'One last hunt.'

He felt the Storm Eagle respond, pulsing flows of energy and machine vitality rippling to life around him. Ruptured connections surged with renewed power.

The avionics panel flickered, the gem-lights blinking in sequence. He eased power through the Storm Eagle's veins, careful not to push too hard, and smiled as the craft lifted from the furrow it had ploughed in the dust. Clouds billowed around it as Wayland teased the gunship back into the air, lifting the nose and pushing power to the engines.

'That's it, brother. One final flight together.'

When it came, the impact was ferocious.

Locked in the death throes of its slain pilots, the trans-orbital fell fifteen hundred metres back down into the volcano, a slow-moving wrecking ball with a mass of over a thousand tons. Dragged down by the internal gravity of the caldera's habitable interior, it rolled with ponderous majesty and slammed against the inside face of the hollowed-out mountain.

Its hull buckled, and thousands of litres of fuel-grade promethium gushed out in viscous sheets that fell like iridescent rainbows. Silver skinned freight containers spilled from its ruptured cargo bays in their hundreds, tumbling like a rain of coins from a dead man's hand.

The trans-orbital rolled onto its side, its drive unit still firing as it ploughed into the towering silos of ancient atomic waste. Irradiated slag from lethally unsafe power plants and dangerous fissile reactions mushroomed into the air and hung suspended between the competing forces of internal gravity and external weightlessness.

Blazing wreckage peeled from the falling trans-orbital as it tore down through the silos to smash back onto the landing platform. The vessel struck hard, its keel splitting with the force of the impact. Its internal spaces folded inwards like crumpled foil as its enormous mass buckled structural stanchions and drove it into the ground The heat from its drive ignited the aerosolised fuel-air mix filling the volcano's interior and transformed its volume into a rolling inferno of atomic flame.

A plume of white-hot fire raced up the throat of the volcano and burst from the caldera.

As though Herodotus Omega were reclaiming the active glories of its past.

9

The Mountain Wakes
Ur-Drakes
They Will Survive

Sharrowkyn could see was fire.

Orange flames filled the cracked lenses of his helm, and he could feel their heat through rents in his armour. His visor hazed red, crazed with distortion. The internal auspex was sending him a continuous stream of warning clicks, but with the right lens splintered, he couldn't read what it was telling him.

Sharrowkyn pushed himself upright, blinking back the pain from numerous crushed vertebrae and a piercing wound in his side. Blood loss was minimal - his enhanced physiology had seen to that his armour could do nothing to keep the pain at bay.

He pushed off, trying to find his bearings.

The vox screeched static. No one was answering.

Red-hued smoke filled the wreckage, and he saw a slumped form crushed against a cogitator panel. Smoke and heat made it impossible to tell who it was. Structural elements strong enough to survive breaking atmosphere and re-entry were bent like stalks of corn by the force of the crash. He lurched over to the body, pushing through ropes of hanging cables and sheets of metal flapping like cloth.

Cadmus Tyro. It was Cadmus Tyro.

Sharrowkyn tried to see exactly how the captain was pinned. To move something wrongly could cause a catastrophic movement of the steelwork and kill Tyro. He was no Techmarine. and found it impossible to tell how the interconnected elements of structure were supported.

Sharrowkyn knew he didn't have time to be careful.

He took his best guess and pushed.

Nothing.

'Out of the way, Sharrowkyn,' said Ulrach Branthan, stepping through the smoke.

Branthan bent his mechanised bulk to the nearest stanchion and braced his shoulder against the metal. Grunting with effort, Branthan pushed, spliced fibre-bundle muscles of a Dreadnought and pure will against the crushing weight pinning Tyro.

The column of steel groaned as it bent upwards.

Only fractionally, but it was enough.

Sharrowkyn dragged Tyro clear, and as soon as the pressure on the captain s chest was eased. Tyro drew in a huge, sucking breath. He got his feet under him and stood, taking Sharrowkyn's outstretched hand.

'Is everyone accounted for?' he asked, his voice little more than a wheeze.

'No,' said Sharrowkyn. 'I haven't seen anyone else.'

The wreckage around them groaned, heavy beams of structural steel twisting like a wet doth being wrung out. A billowing wall of flame erupted from somewhere below. A booming string of explosions shook the ruins of the trans-orbital.

'We have to get out of here, or we'll be buried alive,' said Sharrowkyn.

A cascade of debris fell all around them as if in confirmation, steel, work, cables and burning insulation material.

'The Magna Mater?' asked Tyro.

'Who knows? If someone didn't get it out, then it's gone.'

Branthan led the way, with Sharrowkyn and Tyro following in his wake. They weaved a zigzagging path through the wreckage. Passages that ought to have led to evacuation points were choked with debris or fire, forcing them to double back or push through torn bulkheads in search of a way out.

The insistent clicking in Sharrowkyn's ear kept getting louder, but he couldn't disable it.

Deafening roars of flame and splitting metal filled the crashed trans-orbital, but Sharrowkyn's senses picked out something rhythmic, something deliberate that didn't fit the chaotic narrative of the ship's death screams.

'Wait,' he said, halting their progress along a flame-filled companionway.

'Whatever it is, Sharrowkyn, we don't have time to stop,' said Branthan.

Sharrowkyn set off along a buckled transit, the ceiling dripping with globules of ignited fuel like sizzling pearls.

'Come on!' yelled Sharrowkyn as the walls bulged inwards with pressure from above.

The Iron Hands followed him immediately, trusting his survival instincts to find a way out. Now that he knew what he was listening for, Sharrowkyn could easily pick out the hammering sound.

He pushed into a wide gallery that should have been deep in the dorsal section of die ship, but which was now almost open to the outside. Whole decks had been tom away, and Ignatius Numen was busy punching his way through a buckled portion of what was now effectively the outer hull.

His helmet had been smashed and lay in splintered pieces at his feet, and even had he not been rendered all but deaf, the roar of names would have covered their approach. Sharrowkyn approached from the side, letting Numen know he was there with plenty of distance. The veteran looked up, startled. He nodded, checking who was with Sharrowkyn.

'Tarsa? The gene-witch?' he asked.

'Unknown,' said Branthan, pushing through the wreckage to add his own fists to Numen's work. Between them, they soon tore the metal hide of the trans-orbital apart, and a wave of furnace heat surged inside. Flames from the wrecked vessel's fuel cells reached hundreds of metres into the air, and billowing clouds of tar-black smoke gathered and seethed like an endless storm.

'Go!' said Branthan, and Numen pushed his way through. Sharrowkyn followed him, then Tyro, and finally Branthan.

Visibility was near zero thanks to the heat and smoke, and even Sharrowkyn struggled to get his bearings. He crouched as low to the ground as he could, scanning for points of reference. Lakes of burning fuel pooled in craters, and a waterfall of flaming promethium spilled into the chasm at the chamber's heart.

The heat in the chamber was becoming intolerable, a bone-deep, searing pain against which his armour was offering no protection. He could feel his normally ashen skin reacting to the temperature. Oily sweat oozed from his pores, to protect him as much as cool him.

Sharrowkyn saw the crates and packing materials they had sheltered behind. Miraculously, they remained unscathed, and behind them, he saw the way back through the mountain to where the Storm Eagle had gone down. Wayland was savvy enough to know that would need to serve as their extraction point, having surely seen the trans-orbital crash.

'There,' he said, springing to his feet. 'That's our way out.'

'What about the Magna Mater?' said Numen. 'Do we have it?'

'Perhaps Ta'lab Vita-37 has it, perhaps not. But if it's still on the ship, it won't last much longer,' said Tyro. ‘We may not have it, but at least the traitors won't either. I call that a win for us.'

'But the others...?' Numen said. "We can't leave our brother behind.'

'If we go back in there looking for Tarsa, then we all die,' said Sharrowkyn.

'No, there must be a way,' protested Numen.

'Ignatius,' said Tyro, firmly but not unkindly. 'He's gone.'

Ever the pragmatist, Numen nodded, and Sharrowkyn led them through the destruction.

Explosions detonated all around them, and rubble fell from above as weakened structures and rock crashed down. Each breath caught in Sharrowkyn's chest, searing and agonising to take. He felt wet movement in his throat, and knew his lungs and oesophagus were adapting to better filter each inhalation.

But it didn't seem to be helping. He felt his skin burning beneath his armour, and a deadly, caustic lethargy settled within his marrow. He stumbled, but Tyro caught him. Together they pushed onwards. Sharrowkyn's vision was swimming, and grey, vein-shot clouds seeped into his eyes. He saw movement ahead, a flash of silver, but couldn't be sure it wasn't some trick of the heat or whatever was affecting his vision.

Tyro dropped to one knee, his chest heaving with effort. Even Branthan struggled in the smoke and heat, the Heart of Iron pulsing in his chest as though in distress.

'What's happening?' said Sharrowkyn, the words slurred and hard to form. 'Fire alone should not affect us this way.'

'It's not just the heat,' said Tyro, hauling him to his feet.

They pressed on, and again, Sharrowkyn saw the gleam of silver ahead. A mummified figure, bandage-wrapped and with her cloak on fire. The gene-

witch tore the cloak from her shoulders and beckoned them onwards.

Limping, battered and weary beyond endurance, the four Space Marines slumped into the cover of the materiel crates. The intolerable heat dropped fractionally, and smoke peeled from the crates. This cover wouldn't last for long.

‘Do you have it?' asked Ta'lab Vita-37. They all knew what she meant.

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'No.'

Ta'lab Vita-37's head sank to her chest.

'I failed you, my matriarch,' she said, talking to someone likely already dead.

'Maybe it is better that it burns,' said Sharrowkyn. 'You said yourself the Magna Mater was too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands.'

'Dangerous or not,' she said, 'it was the legacy of the Selenar, and I swore an oath to keep it safe.'

'Better it burns than falls into the hands of traitors,' said Tyro.

'Better it burns than any of you claim it,' spat Ta'lab Vita-37. 'Loyalist? Traitor...? Fo was right, you are *all* misbegotten monsters.'

'Throne!' said Ulrach Branthan, pointing back the way they had come.

Sharrowkyn turned, and now understood the source of the insistent, clicking warnings in his ear.

The heat he was feeling wasn't simply from the flames.

All but one of the giant silos of ancient radioactive waste were catastrophically ruptured. Cascades of irradiated dust, disintegrated ferrocrete and spent fuel rods were spilling into the chamber and filling the air with enormous quantities of lethally toxic particles and fumes.

But it wasn't the ruptured silos to which Branthan was pointing.

A lone figure emerged from the flames of the trans-orbital's wreckage.

He waded through the worst of the radioactive waste, the once jade green of his armour blackened, the metal and ceramite bubbling as it melted.

He swayed with every faltering step, dragging the silver case of the Magna Mater.

His helmet was gone, and even through the haze of fire, his agony was unmistakable.

'Tarsa!' cried Numen.

The pain was unimaginable. It seared down through his armour, past his

flesh and into his very spirit. He could see nothing but flames, but fire held no fear for Atesh Tarsa.

He was Nocturne born. A Promethean son, raised in the shadow of Mount Deathfire and forged on its basalt slopes. Every step sent shooting spikes of pain up through his pelvis and into his spine. Tarsa could barely remember why he was here, his mind filled with broken glass and the flesh burning off his bones.

His skin crisped and roasted in the heat, flaking from the thinnest portions of his skull.

One step, then another. Keep going. Head down into the flames. Fire roared across the red earth, scorching the surface of the mountain. He looked up, seeing the slopes of Mount Heath belching smoke and flame. Through all the agony wracking his body, Tarsa smiled. He had long given up any hope of seeing Nocturne again, yet here it was, welcoming him home as a true son of Vulkan.

A burning sun glared down, and Tarsa gasped as the silhouette of an eagle sweep across it. Its wings were golden in the firelight.

Tarsa had never seen anything quite as beautiful.

A silver case, heavy beyond what its appearance would suggest, dragged behind him, but he no longer knew what it was All he knew was that it had been entrusted to him, and that he must bear it to safety. But it was too heavy a burden.

Too much for any warrior to bear. Who could ask such a thing of him?

But the duty of every Salamander was to bear the burdens others could not.

To stand where others fell, to march into the fire when others turned their backs.

All sense of the world around him was consumed in fire and smoke.

The darkness of his skin peeled back, flesh flying in the hellstorm surrounding him like cinders stamped from a hearth.

Yet still he marched. Nothing would stop him. Nothing could.

He staggered, a vortex of superheated air threatening to drive him to his knees.

He wouldn't let it.

Another step through the fire that was killing him with every poisoned breath.

Onwards into the flames and searing atomic haze he walked.

The eagle flew with him every step of the way as the sky burned and the ground ran molten. His every step across the mountain's haunches was a homecoming, and he welcomed it, wishing he could have gazed upon the face of his primarch one last time.

His foot slipped, and Tarsa dropped to one knee.

He tried to rise, but the strength had fled his body.

How easy it would be to simply lie down and die.

But that was not the way of the Salamanders. They lived for the fire, relished the challenge of facing it every day. To be burned was to know you were alive.

He heard the eagles cry, and with a roar of defiance, Tarsa rose to his feet, body all but flayed alive by the atomic fury raging around him. He took another step.

Two more. He slipped again, and this time there would be no getting up.

But he did not fall.

A giant in burning armour was there to catch him.

'I've got you, brother,' he said.

Tarsa looked up into a face as midnight black as his own, the face of a Salamander.

But no ordinary Salamander. This was the face of a demigod. Haloed by fire and the black slopes of the mountain that forged him, with a smiting hammer in one hand, a blade in the other.

'My lord...' said Tarsa. 'You... *live*'.

'Aye, Tarsa, I live,' said Primarch Vulkan.

'I saw you,' gasped Tarsa, desperate to pass on these last words. 'On Terra... dead, but I held true. I knew. Vulkan lives! I knew you would... never... leave your sons.'

'I leave no one behind,' said Vulkan.

Tarsa nodded and tried to turn, to pass his burden on, but he had no more strength to give.

Vulkan reached over him and hefted the silver case as though it weighed nothing at all.

He was a primarch, after all, one of the Emperor's favoured sons.

'I... tried... my lord,' said Tarsa, the last embers of his soul dimming. 'I tried to prove worthy of you.'

Vulkan nodded and said, 'You asked me once if I trusted you. Do you remember?'

Tarsa could not, but he nodded. Anything for his gene-sire

'I said, "You come from a land of fire. You lived in the light of burning mountains. Aye. you I trust." Do you remember that?'

A memory surfaced, a brutish giant knee-deep in corpses.

But it meant nothing to him now.

He heard the roar of a Firedrake somewhere nearby. A big one by the sound of it.

'I trust you, Atesh Tarsa,' said Vulkan.

The crimson of Tarsa's eyes dulled like the last light of a cooling forge.

He heard the roaring once more, a swelling chorus of Nocturne's beasts.

And the ur-drakes dwelling in Nocturnes molten heart rose up to bring him home.

Wayland kept the power low, flying a figure-of-eight pattern around the southern flanks of Herodotus Omega. The gunship shook with the violence of the volcanos eruption. The initial firespout had been enormous, a concentrated blast of superheated gas and flame.

He'd pulled the craft away from its slopes, instinctively fearing a devastating pyroclastic rain of debris and rock, but the concentration of the flame and lack of debris told him this was no normal volcanic event.

This fire had all the hallmarks of a cataclysmic crash on a landing platform.

He d seen the trans-orbital going down, but had hoped whoever was at the helm had skill enough to bring it down safely. The eruption of fire from the caldera had put that hope to the sword and set a cold hand around his heart.

Wayland concentrated on keeping the gunship aloft, while Thamatica scanned the vox-channels in search of transmissions from their brothers.

'Anything?' he asked.

Thamatica shook his head. They could both imagine the devastation

that must be filling the volcano. Legion warriors could withstand much, *but this*...?

'They will survive,' said Wayland, as though the power of his words could force the universe to bend to his need. 'They *will* survive.'

'Aye, Sabik,' said Thamatica. 'They will.'

10

Time to Die
On the Run
Freaks and Monsters

Pride and awe filled Cadmus Tyro as he watched Ignatius Numen carry Atesh Tarsa and the Magna Mater from the atomic firestorm engulfing the trans-orbital. They'd watched the Salamanders warrior fall, and to see their prize within sight but beyond reach was a knife in the heart. That Tarsa had made it as far as he had was nothing short of a miracle, but Tyro saw that not even Garuda's cawing encouragement would help him reach them.

Ignatius Numen had immediately stepped towards the doomed warrior, throwing off Tyro's grip with an angry growl that was some where between grief and anger.

'I have to get him. He is our brother.'

'You'll die,' said Tyro.

Numen shrugged. 'Did any of us think we would live this long anyway?'

Tyro had no answer, and was humbled to witness one of the most selfless acts he had ever seen. He saw Tarsa fall, only to be caught by the Iron Hand. He saw Numen hold Tarsa as he died, honoring his sacrifice with words none of them would know.

And now Ignatius Numen completed the Salamander's journey

The veteran staggered back out of the growing firestorm, his head seared to the bone by the radioactive fire. He fell to his knees along-side Tyro and Sharrowkyn, finally allowing Tarsa's body to slip from his shoulder and allowing Ta'lab Vita-37 to take the Magna Mater from him. They lowered the veteran to the ground, and Tyro winced to see his wounds. Numen's chest was a ruin of molten metal and blackened flesh, bone and organs

gleaming wetly from within.

Garuda swooped down from the storm, its wings trailing smoke and dust.

Its head was bowed. It too knew this was the end.

'Is it safe?' asked Numen.

'Don t speak,' said Tyro. 'Save your strength for the march out of here.'

'Is it safe?' Numen asked again, looking past Tyro to Ta'lab Vita-37.

She looked up from a readout on the front of the silver case and nodded. 'It's safe.'

'Good,' said Numen. 'I think I'll die now.'

Tyro took Numen's arm in the warrior's grip. He wanted to say something meaningful to mark this warrior's heroic sacrifice, to voice his boundless pride and admiration for the veteran's service.

But Ignatius Numen was dead.

'We have to go, Captain Tyro,' said Ta'lab Vita-37. 'The radiation levels are rising.'

Tyro ignored her, holding Numen's fist against the eagle of his plastron.

'I never knew a warrior as strong and fearless as you,' he said. 'Your trust was not given lightly, but when it was, it was unbreakable. You were a true Iron Ha-'

'Come on,' snapped Ta'lab Vita-37. 'We have not time for dreary sentimentality.'

Anger filled Tyro, and he turned that fury on Ta'lab Vita-37. He surged upright, and his gauntlet closed around the gene-witch's throat. He pulled her around and forced her to her knees beside the burned bodies of Tarsa and Numen. With a fractional increase in pressure, he could crush her neck, and for the briefest instant he wanted to.

'These men were heroes,' he roared. 'Look at them.'

Tyro felt a gentle touch on his arm, and turned to see Sharrowkyn. The Raven Guard shook his head. 'Ease back, captain,' he said Tyro's rage was abruptly replaced with a hollow emptiness in his gut he knew all too well. The pain of losing men under his command that never, ever got easier.

Tyro released Ta'lab Vita-37 and said, 'These warriors died for what is in that container. They did their duty, and you will honour their memory or I will kill you right now.'

Ta'lab Vita-37 nodded, and rose to her feet, rubbing the bruises blossoming on her neck.

'Make no mistake, Cadmus Tyro, I despise your kind and the purpose for which you were created,' she said, 'but I swear I will honour their names. Now we have to go, and we have to go now.'

'She's right,' said Ulrach Branthan, looking up into the fire and smoke boiling out through the volcano's summit. A ululating howl echoed from the interior of the caldera, and a blazing jet wash pummelled the ground with a concussive blast of superheated air.

A Thunderhawk gunship plunged through the smoke, executing a textbook assault drop.

The fire had burned its colours down to the bare metal, but the carved wolfs-head panel on the sloped glacis was unmistakable.

'The Sons of Horus,' cried Ta'lab Vita-37. 'They're here.'

The assault doors slammed back on its fuselage, and six hulking figures dropped from the gunships interior. Armoured entirely in black, and too titanically bulky to be legionaries in Mark IV plate, they landed with the booming slam of metal on metal.

There was only one class of warrior that would dare assault into the heart of an expanding atomic hellstorm.

Terminators.

'Run!' yelled Tyro.

They ran.

There could be no standing against six warriors in Terminator armour.

Each was a walking tank, impregnable to anything except the heaviest weapons and all but unkillable. Three grievously wounded legionaries and a half-mad gene-witch would have no chance at all.

Portions of Tyro's spine had been crushed by the debris in the trans-orbital, and both his lungs had been ruptured. His multi-lung was damaged too, and it was only a matter of time until it collapsed. A looseness in his chest told him the bone shield protecting his internal organs had been shattered. Every breath and footfall sent bolts of fire shooting through his body, and he felt blood pooling within the cavities of his armour.

The darkness of the tunnels carved through the volcano was stark after the searing brightness of the caldera. Grey-walled passages split in a leading back through the abandoned laboratories and deserted research temples.

'Come on,' said Ta'lab Vita-37, taking the leftmost tunnel. 'Back the way we came.'

Sharrowkyn turned as the smoke twitched behind them. Hideous shadows twisted over the bare rock floor, and Sharrowkyn detected an awful, sour-milk taste he had come to recognise as warpcraft.

'Down!' he cried as a hosing blast of storm bolter fire chewed up the rockcrete. The hard bangs of mass-reactives filled the passageway. A devastating impact spun Tyro from his feet, and the heat and fragments of the detonation shredded his cheek and pulped his left eye.

Branthan lifted the gene-witch and dragged her behind him. A pair of mass-reactives punched into his back. Chunks of flesh and bone-fragments exploded from Branthan's ribs like shrapnel and sliced Ta'lab Vita-37's arms and legs.

She screamed in pain, and the case containing the Magna Mater fell to the ground.

Sharrowkyn dived to retrieve it as Branthan sank to his knees, two fist-sized craters gouged in his back, exit wounds twice that.

'Ulrach!' cried Tyro, his vision filled with blood as he rolled into the cover of the passageway. Branthan didn't answer, just shook his head and grunted as he pushed himself upright. Again, he dragged the gene-witch behind him, copious volumes of blood pouring from his wounds, too severe for even transhuman physiology to repair. The Heart of Iron emitted a pulsing, emerald glow, pushed to the limits of its Dark Age power in keeping Branthan alive.

'Lead us,' he said to Sharrowkyn between gritted teeth.

The Raven Guard nodded and headed deeper into the mountain

There was no more gunfire, only the sounds of inhuman laughter following in their wake.

Tyro knew their enemies were toying with them. Terminators were awesomely powerful, and though they were no, fast, they were utterly relentless. They knew there was no way their quarry could escape them. Running them down was just a matter of *when*, not if.

'You're hurt,' said Branthan, noting Tyro's bloodied face.

'So are you,' replied Tyro. 'More so.'

* * *

Sharrowkyn led them into the vast chamber of lined-up gene-pods. The lifter chains rattled from their mounts on the cavern roof and the rumble of ancient, buried machinery gave the air a greasy electrical tang. The explosion in the caldera had shaken hundreds of pods from their mounts to shatter on the cavern floor.

Pools of milky, viscous fluids drained through iron grates, and the crackling energies of long-dormant machinery coming to life filled the chamber with traceries of light.

'What's happening here?' said Tyro, struggling to draw breath. Ta'lab Vita-37 rapped her staff on the ground, and red lights flickered behind her smooth-faced helm. She too was nearing the end of her endurance. Her left arm hung limp at her side, and her right leg was drenched in red from the hip down.

A portion of the floor in the centre of the cavern groaned as shuttered portions began to roll back. Warning lights blinked as a wide platform of dark metal rose from below. Ten gloss-black gene-pods were spaced in a circle around a central cogitator panel. Unlike the others, these offered no window onto what lay within, their surfaces frosted and opaque.

Dragging her bloodied leg behind her, Ta'lab Vita-37 made her way towards the centre of the raised platform and the panel.

'What are these?' said Sharrowkyn.

'I told you that this place produced freaks and monsters, yes?' said Ta'lab Vita-37, extruding a forked data cable from the back of her wrist. One connected to the panel, the other slotted home into her staff. Lights flickered up and down its length.

'You did,' replied Sharrowkyn. 'You also told us you destroyed them all.'

'I lied,' said Ta'lab Vita-37.

Trastevere pushed deeper into the mountain, his storm bolter extended before him. He and his squad of Justaerin could take a city without effort, could storm a fortress and render it rubble in a day. To bring this many warriors to hunt down a few upstart legionaries who had somehow found their way to Luna’s surface was overkill of such preposterous scale that he had almost questioned the First Captain's order.

Ezekyle Abaddon's eyes told him any such question would be the last mistake he ever made. Whatever was at stake here was clearly enough to divert the elite troops of the Sons of Horus.

Their quarry was wounded and at bay. Spilled blood traced a path directly towards them, and - cumbersome as Terminator armour rendered its wearer - there could be no escaping their pursuit. The mountain tremored with the beat of buried machinery, as though it were slowly coming to life after centuries of dormancy. Trastevere was reminded of his youth in the murder caves of Cthonia. His life then was one of darkness and hearing the ever-present drum beat of mining machinery. Death lurked around every outcropping, and life was held cheaper than a cupped hand of water. But he was no longer the callow youth who clutched punch-daggers of flinted razor shards and fought with teeth and fury to survive. Now he was the stalking death.

'Life signs ahead,' said Vornak, looking up from his auspex.

'Combat spread,' ordered Trastevere, rapping his storm bolter against his chest.

'Seriously?' said Urgave. 'There's only four of them, and they're badly hurt.'

'They're legionaries,' cautioned Trastevere.

'They're rabble,' said Urgave. 'I saw the armour tags. They're scraps from Isstvan V.'

Anger touched Trastevere. 'Then the fact they've survived this long should be a warning not to underestimate them.'

He heard his own words and suddenly believed them.

Perhaps the First Captain had been right to send in such numbers. Any loyalists that had fought their way from the massacre on the black sands were clearly warriors whose prowess demanded respect.

'Hold,' said Vornak.

"What is it?'

'The life readings.'

"What about them?' demanded Trastevere.

'I'm... not sure,' said Vornak. 'For a second it looked like...'

'Like what?'

'Like there were new signals,' finished Vornak.

'New? There's only four of them,' hissed Urgave. 'We're wasting time.

Let's get in there and be done with this. You think Lupercal will wait for us before the assault on Terra begins? Damned if I won't be in the spear tip to the surface of the Throneworld.'

Trastevere pulled the feed from Vornak's auspex onto his visor.

The imagery was confusing, a blurring of swelling signals of disproportionate potency.

He could make no sense of it, but his orders were clear.

Kill the intruders and secure the prize beneath Herodotus Omega.

'We are within a sanctum of the Selenar,' he said. 'It is only to be expected that we will encounter anomalous life signs.'

The matter decided, Trastevere led them onwards, following the traces of their prey: blood, sweat and fear-stink. The darkness beneath the mountain was lit with flickering lumens. Had their prey smashed them, hoping it would slow their pursuers?

The passage opened into an echoing chamber that stank of spilled amniotic fluids and spoiled meat. Upright pods stood in ordered ranks, like sus-an tanks in an apothecarion. Ghostly forms drifted within, strangely shaped and dead.

The ceiling of the chamber was hundreds of metres high, and heavy lifter-rigs on deep rails spanned the space from wall to wall. Hooked chains hung from above, bearing heavy cargo containers that swayed overhead

His auto-sense detected a rancid smell familiar to every warrior.

Rotten meat, and organs spoiled with decomposition.

Trastevere scanned left and right, his senses alert for movement.

Instincts honed over centuries of war told him something was amiss, but he could not make out any distinct signals from their prey.

A low moaning drifted through the chamber. Settling metal or something hostile?

'What was that?' said Vornak.

'Silence,' snapped Trastevere.

They reached the centre of the chamber, where a platform bore ten of the same sus-an tanks standing in ranked-up formation. A cloaked figure lay slumped in a spreading pool of blood, her body resting against a raised cogitator panel. A slow dance of fading light slithered across the blood-spattered face of a gleaming silver helmet.

A *gene-witch*.

The figure looked up as the Justaerin approached.

'You're too late,' said the gene-witch. 'They're already gone.'

"You're lying,' said Trastevere. 'I can smell them.'

She tried to speak, but her chest hacked a lungful of bilious fluid into her helmet. She reached up and removed it, dropping it to the platform with a heavy clang of metal.

Her revealed face was narrow, angular and androgynous, with skin as pale as the moon itself, her skull shaven and scarred. Her eyes were a shockingly vivid indigo, but Trastevere could see the life fading from them with every slowing heartbeat.

'You have only moments left to you,' said Trastevere.

'I have lived long enough,' she said. 'Long enough to see my sons born and grow.'

Trastevere aimed his weapon at her chest and said, 'What sons? What is in those pods?'

'Nothing,' said the gene-witch with her last breath. 'At least not any more.'

A screaming howl burst from the left, and Trastevere turned in time to see his rearguard barrelled from his feet by something as hulking as he was. Wet and stinking, its flesh was bloated and ghoul-pallid from long immersion in unknown fluids. It trailed drooling cables from unfinished plug ports in its spine.

It howled in fury, the nightmarish creation of a mad anatomist, a freak of nature that had somehow not spontaneously aborted itself. Even the stuttering light of the chamber and the speed with which it moved couldn't conceal its hideous form.

Swollen, twisted musculature and plastic limbs now fused with vestigial organs and bone-horns growing beyond its flesh. Distended nubs of bone and flopping sheets of unused skin. Gristle and meat formed from aberrant genomes never intended for human flesh-smithing.

And teeth, so many teeth.

It lifted fists like forge hammers and slammed them down in a two-handed blow that crushed the warrior's helmet and skull to shards.

Mass-reactives punched through its unnatural body, blasting wet chunks of deathly meat from its back and side. Shredded, the thing dropped to its

knees, roaring in mindless fury. Trastevere put a bolt through its skull and it fell with a grunt of pain. Still it struggled to rise, and he fired another two shots to make sure.

'Kill it with fire,' he said, and Urgave turned the black-copper nozzles of his heavy flame-unit upon it.

A jet of sun-bright promethium blazed over the thing's body.

The firelight glittered on the predatory eyes of more of the monsters.

They burst from concealment in the tanks around the Justaerin, a pack of ravening beasts with horrifically mutated bodies. All gristle and exposed ribs, the meat of their bodies was punctured with blistered bone-horns and patched with coarse hair like wire. Their multiple eyes were lit with the madness and animal fury of eternal pain. Storm bolters roared and scores of mass-reactives detonated within their attackers' bodies.

The stink of boiled blood and voided intestines filled Trastevere's senses.

'What are they?' said Vornak.

Abominations. That was the word that sprang to mind, but Trastevere saw something hideously familiar in their gene-bulked scale and the hints of a hardened carapace beneath the slabs of overgrown muscle and bone, as though one of his kind had been unnaturally packed with growth-enhancers then recklessly stirred in the primordial soup with a random assortment of genetic material.

Typical Selenar.

'They are monsters,' he said, blazing at targets. 'Selenar by-blows.' Mass-reactives would kill most things thrice over with a single impact, but it took entire magazines of shells to kill these.

Another of the Justaerin was dragged down, his armour torn apart like paper by the immense strength of the Selenar's monsters. Vornak howled in anger as a creature with six brutally strong arms ripped his storm bolter and then his arm from him. He took a quarter-step back and pistoned his remaining fist through the creature's face.

It didn't stop, for it had other faces - one half-submerged in a fold of flesh that was frilled like a lizard's, one with a fang-toothed orifice that served as its mouth.

Another creature had what looked like steel cabling for sinews and the multifaceted eyes of an arachnid. And yet another was strangely and ethereally beautiful that it reminded Trastevere of the time he had seen the

Phoenician fighting on the field of Isstvan. Vornak fell beneath the pounding fists of the bestial mob. They tore his throat out, and as one lifted its head with a mouthful of bloody meat in its jaws, Trastevere saw an echo that was so dreadfully familiar to him that he actually paused in shock.

Alone among their attackers, it had a face that was entirely human or, more accurately, entirely transhuman. It had the same wide gene-bulked cheekbones and high forehead common to most legionaries, but this thing echoed the sardonic, hawkish features of Hours Lupercal himself.

Trastevere's anger threatened to overwhelm him, but he was Justaerin and did not succumb to emotion. He detached from the primal urge to strike out in blind fury. He compartmentalised his rage, ready to unleash it upon the loyalist legionaries.

Five of his men were down, the others bloodied but still fighting with rigid discipline.

That was the difference here. *That* would decide this fight.

The monsters had no honed skill, and no discipline.

They did not fight as a unified whole, but as individual monsters.

The shock of their assault had been brutal, but only seconds had passed since its beginning.

'Close ranks,' ordered Trastevere.

And now the discipline and training of the Justaerin took its toll on their attackers.

The last of the gunfire died away, and Sharrowkyn knew Ta'lab Vita-37's monsters were all dead. She had promised her ur-legionaries would buy them some time, but Sharrowkyn had seen the Justaerin in action and knew it wouldn't be much.

They'd survived longer than he had expected, but it still wouldn't be enough.

He, Tyro and Branthan were badly wounded, their bodies all but broken and losing lethal volumes of blood inside their war-plate. They were leaving sticky tracks even a blind man could follow. Garuda flew alongside them, its flight erratic thanks to its buckled wings and crash dented body

Branthan staggered with every step, one hand pressed to the wall to

support him as he moved. The Heart of Iron was keeping him alive through some ancient miracle of technology he didn't understand, but surely even it could not support his existence much longer.

Tyro ran hunched over, the grinding pressure of his broken back doubling him up as his spine tore itself to splinters within its muscled sheath. If he reached beyond the mountain it would be a tale worthy of Medusa's finest, a legend to inspire future generations of the Iron Hands, were there going to be any.

His own wounds were minor by comparison, though the pain racing around his body did not match that objective assessment. The crushed vertebrae in his back screamed agony with every running footfall, and the wound in his side kept tearing open. A sensation of emptiness in his chest told him his primary heart had been ruptured and the secondary organ was taking the strain. A legionary's reserve heart was only intended to sustain a wounded warrior for short bursts of time until he could reach the Apothecaries.

It hadn't been designed for extended stresses like this.

He wondered how much longer it could last.

'Did you hear that?' gasped Tyro, falling to his knees with a grunt of pain. 'They'll be coming now.'

'Then get up, damn you.' said Branthan, hauling Tyro to his feet. 'You are an Iron Hand. We don't kneel in the presence of the enemy.'

Tyro bit back a cry of pain and drew a sucking breath.

'Apologies, captain,' he grunted, his fists bunched against 'Won't happen again.'

'The entrance to the ductway isn't far,' Sharrowkyn told him. Tyro nodded, but said nothing, his every scrap of will focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

A booming voice echoed through the undergrourrd passageway full of indignant anger and a hunger for vengeance.

'You cannot run forever,' it said. 'We will catch you, and your deaths will not be as quick as your gene-witch's monsters'. I, Trastevere of the Justaerin, captain of the Eye's Watch, promise you this.'

They pushed onwards, every metre gained a victory, every step that brought them closer to the outside a gift. They could hear the crashing footsteps of the Justaerin behind them, ponderous and inevitable as a

coming storm.

Trastevere's taunts followed them, each word promising bloody retribution and pain.

Sharrowkyn believed every word of it.

His spirits soared as he saw the single trapezoidal archway that led to the storage chamber. Irradiated fumes swirled just below the ceiling, the venting system no longer functional nor drawing any of the toxins from within.

'We're here,' said Sharrowkyn, threading the stacks of piled-high construction materiel and broken machinery towards the entrance of the venting network. 'Come on.'

He paused at the entrance to the ductway when he saw that Tyro and Branthan were not following him. One look at how the two captains had positioned themselves told Sharrowkyn what they were planning. 'If you fight they'll kill you,' he said.

Tyro worked the action of his bolter, checking what load he had left. The underslung loaders on Branthan's arms clattered with the last of his shells shucking into the flexmag.

'We cannot outrun them,' said Branthan, staring through the arch. 'So we will *fight* them.'

Sharrowkyn's instincts to strike back at the traitors warred with his urge to escape the mountain. He had no love for Branthan, but counted Tyro as a loyal comrade in arms. They were not friends, but they had shed blood together. Their own and that of traitors.

Branthan read the turbulent struggle of emotions within him.

'We cannot outpace the Sons of Horus but *you* can,' he said, turning away. 'Go, Raven Guard, get the Magna Mater out of here. Consider this my last command.'

Sharrowkyn hesitated, torn between obeying the order and fighting alongside his brothers.

'Nykona,' said Tyro. 'The mission comes first. It always does, can be no other way.'

Sharrowkyn snapped the magazine from his bolter. He handed the shells to Tyro.

'Make every shell count, Cadmus,' he said.

11

A Glorious Death
Breaking Free
Alone in the Dark

A curious calm settled over Cadmus Tyro as he thumbed the last of the shells into the magazine of his bolter. He wished he'd had better words to see the Raven Guard warrior on his way, some way to convey the honour it had been to fight alongside him.

Now only he and Branthan remained.

Even Garuda was gone. The bird had perched on Branthan's shoulder and leaned down as if whispering silently in his ear. Branthan had nodded, and the bird had flown off into the ductwork without a backward glance.

'Where is it going?' asked Tyro.

'Wherever it wills,' replied Branthan. 'Enough of Garuda. Look to your weapon.'

Tyro had. Even with Sharrowkyn's ammo, the magazine wasn't full.

'A few bursts and we'll be hand to hand, he said.

‘Against Terminators,' said Branthan.

Tyro looked up, and with a slow nod said, 'Almost seems unfair to them.'

'We will give them a glorious death by which to remember us.'

Tyro said, 'Since the fire and fury of Isstvan V, I have been ready to meet this day. Our escape from the world of the black sands only delayed this death.'

'I died there,' said Branthan. 'Or as near as makes no difference. Every time you brought me back from my frozen stasis, I assumed it would be for the last time. I always knew I would be forced to pay back the debt of life incurred on that day. Now that debt is due.'

'I always expected to die far from Terra's light, on some nameless battlefield at the limits of known space,' said Tyro. 'I would be centuries older, grizzled and with a long history of service to the Imperium. I would have lived a life of honour and few regrets.'

'Before the galaxy went mad, I never considered my own death,' replied Branthan. 'Not even in theoretical dialogues with the Thirteenth. The Apothecaries told me that we were basically immortal, and the remembrancers claimed we were gods. That should have been warning enough, for what story of gods does not end with them cast down and destroyed?'

Tyro didn't answer. He saw the shadows of the approaching Justaerin.

He said, 'Captain Branthan, it has been an honour.'

Three hulking shapes moved into the span of the archway, Terminators in armour of deepest black. Their appearance shocked Tyro, for they were torn up and looked as though they had fought their way from one end of a starship to another. Seldom did any foe give company veterans such a beating.

Branthan seemed to shrug, and his underslung guns chugged out heavy bolt-rounds at subsonic velocities. They struck the lead Terminator, and sparks blazed where they met war-plate. Metal tore and ceramite chips flew like shrapnel.

The warrior staggered and took a step back, but didn't fall. He swung his weapon to bear.

Tyro leaned out from his cover, aimed, and squeezed the trigger

A pair of mass-reactives struck the Terminator's magazine, and the warrior's fist vanished in a blazing shower of secondary detonations. The second Terminator swung his assault cannon towards Tyro, its long rotary barrels already spun up to firing speed.

A blitzing storm of high-velocity shells ripped through the crates and materiel. Tyro dived to the side, shooting as he went. The grinding of shattered bone in his back filled his body with pain, and a grey haze dropped across his eyes. He rolled to his feet in agony and aimed for the cannon's ammo hopper at the weapon's rear. He fired, but his aim was skewed and the shell only creased the box.

It ricocheted away, and Tyro gritted his teeth against the pain that bathed his body in fire.

A shell struck him in the chest and exploded against the face of his plastron. It didn't penetrate, but impact trauma drove him back. He staggered and returned fire. Another shell struck him at the junction of thigh and hip, and this one did penetrate.

The explosion blew out the left side of his pelvis, shards of his femur and metal driving up into his gut and groin. Blood filled Tyro's mouth, and he felt entire portions of his internal anatomy come undone. The damage to his organs was catastrophic and utterly non-survivable. Ferocious pain engulfed him, and he fell backwards against a stack of crates, like a king reclining on his throne.

The grey haze over his vision bled into red, and he saw Branthan moving as though in a pict-capture running at half speed, the slides of his bolters racked back empty. His fellow captain's chest was a shattered, chewed-up mess of bloody tunnels carved through his body.

Only the Heart of Iron remained untouched, its silver body pulsing fit to burst.

Branthan ripped the assault cannon from one of the Justaerin and swung it like a club. The heavy breech section caved in the skull of the weapon's bearer. Vast quantities of blood, bone fragments and sopping brain matter sprayed from the ruins of the warrior's helm. He turned to swing it at the third Terminator, but a shell from a storm bolter ploughed a furrow through the top of his skull. It didn't detonate, but carved a canyon through his forehead. Branthan swayed, but remained upright, his body locked in place. For the briefest moment, Tyro dared hope he might fight on, as he had many times before.

But one look into Branthan's blood-filled eyes told him he was dead. The Heart of Iron was finally stilled, and a hero of the Iron Hands had passed from this life. Though his body of flesh and blood was no more, the rigid chassis that had once been the sarcophagus of Brother Bombastus still held him upright.

Even in death, Ulrach Branthan did not kneel in the presence of the enemy.

The Sons of Horus turned on Tyro.

He raised his bolter and pulled the trigger one last time.

The weapon clicked empty. Like him, it had nothing left to give.

The Justaerin who had killed Branthan towered over him, a warrior

bearing the rank insignia of a captain as well as other markings Tyro didn't recognise, but from which he instinctively recoiled. The Justaerin captain held the assault cannon, his fallen brother's blood and brains still wet on its metal. Surely this was Trastevere.

'Only one more remains,' said the traitor.

Tyro summoned his last breath to spit defiance.

'Only one, yes, but he is Raven Guard,' said Tyro with the last of his strength. 'He has a four-minute head start, which is more than he needs. Sharrowkyn was trained by the Shadowmasters of Lycaeus and knows every secret path from here to the Mare Tranquillitatis. Throne, he knows Luna's craters better than the Selenar! With any luck, he's already halfway to Terra.'

Trastevere laughed, a rank, bitter sound, and said, 'Iron Hands make terrible liars.'

Tyro shook his head. 'And Sons of Horus make terrible legionaries.'

Trastevere raised the assault cannon. 'You have a valediction?'

'I have lived a life of honour and few regrets,' said Tyro. 'Can you say the same?'

The assault cannon roared, and the debt incurred on Isstvan V was finally paid in full.

Sharrowkyn emerged from the volcano to the vox in his helmet screeching with static and Wayland's frantic voice.

'*..kyn...spond... If you can...give...posi...*'

'Wayland, I'm out,' he said, breathless and in pain. 'I have the Magna Mater and require immediate extraction. Emphasis on the immediate part.'

No response, just the hiss of more static. He scanned the inky blackness above him, searching for any sign of the Storm Eagle, but could see nothing. He turned as he heard a clatter of metal, reaching for his bolter before he remembered he had given the last of his ammo to Cadmus Tyro.

Garuda flew out, its dented wings spread. Its flight was erratic. It too was hurt. At first he was pleased to see the bird, but his heart sank at the realisation that its appearance could only mean that Tyro and Branthan were dead.

Sharrowkyn tamped down the grief that threatened to swamp him. 'Wayland? Are you there?'

Still no answer. Were they still at the crash site? Had the damage been too

devastating for Wayland and Thamatica to repair. No, he wouldn't believe that. If there had been even the slightest chance of coaxing the gunship into the air, the Iron Fathers would have taken it.

'*Throne, Sharrowkyn*,' said Wayland. '*We feared the worst. I have you in sight. Coming in behind you.*'

Sharrowkyn turned to see the form of the Storm Eagle coming towards him, little more than a metre of clearance between its wings and the canyon walls. The gunship passed overhead, Wayland keeping its speed low for fear it might break apart. Its engines were screaming and stuttering, and Sharrowkyn saw the full extent of the damage it had suffered in the crash.

'Throne, I can't believe you got it flying again,' he said as the gunship descended and the rear assault ramp lowered. Wayland kept it a metre from the ground, as was standard for a combat extraction, but Sharrowkyn saw he couldn't have landed it safely anyway - the landing skids were smashed.

As soon as the ramp was lowered enough, Sharrowkyn swung the Magna Mater into the hold and climbed aboard himself. Garuda flew into the gunship after him and all but fell to the perforated deck.

Every part of Sharrowkyn's body and soul was hurting, but he pushed himself upright and hammered his palm against the closing mechanism for the ramp.

'I'm in,' he said. 'Get us out of here!'

'What about the others?'

'It's just me,' he said, struggling to contain his emotions.

Trastevere and Urgave reached the Lunar surface in time to see a Storm Eagle gunship that had no right to be airborne lifting on damaged engines that flared and stuttered with blue fire. Its hull was buckled and torn, but the glittering silver hand on its flank was undimmed.

He saw a warrior in dusty black armour through the assault ramp as it juddered closed.

Trastevere grunted in amusement.

'Halfway to Terra indeed.'

He lifted the assault cannon and squeezed the trigger.

Sharrowkyn felt the shells tear through his chest and back like searing

rods of fire.

The force of the impacts spun him around, and he collapsed to the deck of the gunship, vast quantities of blood pouring from his ruptured body. Fiery heat spread from the wounds as his overtaxed physiology struggled to contain the damage.

The Magna Mater's container fell beside him, its surface splashed red.

'Sharrowkyn,' called Wayland from the pilot's compartment. 'What was that?'

He slid down the battered fuselage, struggling to speak as pain coursed around his body.

He tried to detach, to assess the damage and what he could do about it.

Two smoking gouges had shattered his right shoulder, an exit wound like a bowl of blood yawned in the knot of cables at his belly, and there was precious little he could do about either.

'If I had to guess,' he said between sucking gulps of red breath, 'I'd say an assault cannon.'

Wayland lifted clear of the canyon walls and rotated the gunship on its axis, aiming it towards the steadily falling debris containing the *Sisypheum*. More impacts struck the hull. Assault cannon fire, Sharrowkyn was correct. Normally that wouldn't trouble a Storm Eagle, but the hull was compromised in ways too numerous to count.

He pushed the engines out as far as he dared, and the impacts died away.

"We're clear,' he said

The time for stealth was over, and a journey to the surface that had taken them several hours would take a little over three minutes in reverse. But those three minutes would see them exposed and vulnerable.

All they could do was run.

The gunship raced, low to the ground, over the pale surface of the Oceanus Procellarum, kicking up lingering veils of dust in its wake. Ahead, and closer to the Lunar surface than he'd have liked, Wayland saw the glinting form of the wrecked launch facility in which they'd hidden the *Sisypheum*.

Perhaps two thousand metres and thirty minutes from impacting on the surface.

He angled a correction in their course, risking a little altitude as he

struggled to hold the gunship steady. Its damaged control surfaces made flying in anything resembling a straight line difficult.

A screeching wail sounded from the threat panel.

'Missile in the air!' he yelled, wrenching the control column to the side. The gunship rolled on its central axis, and Wayland felt the airframe shudder in protest. Still linked to its wounded machine-spirit, he felt freshly welded seams split along the length of the fuselage.

Thamatica had done as much as he could to get them airborne, but evasive manoeuvres were another thing entirely. Wayland saw the burning tail of the missile slam into the surface, the slow-moving after-effects of its detonation muffled by the dense Lunar regolith.

'Just one?' hissed Wayland. 'How little you think of us.'

He rolled and banked as much as he dared, trying to get a fix on their attacker.

There! A Thunderhawk gunship, hull scorched and burned from its combat drop to the volcano's fiery caldera. It rolled around, moving into perfect attack position, above and behind. and Wayland saw long tongues of muzzle flare erupt from its prow cannons.

He pulled up. Too late to avoid the stream of shells.

The Storm Eagle shuddered and lurched sideways with hammering impacts. Wayland grimaced with repercussive pain. He felt the fuselage tear open on the port side.

More stitching blasts of cannon fire punched through the Storm Eagle dorsal armour, tearing forward as the Thunderhawk strafed them from above. The pilot's canopy shattered and the threat panel exploded as high-calibre shells ripped through it.

Blood of man and machine sprayed the interior of the cockpit. Wayland gasped in sudden and shocking pain.

'Thamatica!' he yelled. 'Now might be the right time to try that dangerous idea of yours!'

Thamatica barely heard Wayland.

He'd seen Sharrowkyn fall to the deck of the gunship, but had been powerless to help.

His body was locked rigid in a grav-seat, connected via a score of subcutaneous jacks to the interior of the demersal-splicer. Its alien interior

was awash with violet light, and the machine-spirits within were not the feral things at the heart of most Imperial machinery, these were systems of cold, calculating malovolence.

He'd linked with it in the hopes of bolstering the machine-spin of the Storm Eagle, but the spirit the gunship's soul had rallied at Wayland's imprecations. It had not needed the touch of this pitiless machine of Luna.

But now its unique powers of machine-to-machine communication were in desperate need.

Thamatica could see in realms beyond his normal sight.

As if he were standing within a hyper-detailed noospheric volume, Thamatica saw drifting screeds of light all around him, sig-idents and datableed from a million Selenar machines all across and beneath Luna. He could see them all as bright traceries moving in an exquisite ballet.

'We never knew...' he breathed. 'How different you are.'

He was not welcome within this space, a purveyor of antithetical Martian teachings, a destroyer and enslaver of machines. He felt the tech of Luna grating at his consciousness, looking to eject him from its network, as flesh seeks to expel a foreign body.

No, more like white blood cells looking to overwhelm and destroy an infection.

The only reason he could access this space was because the demersal-splicer had been damaged. Ta'lab Vita-37's staff had broken its ability to defend itself, and that had given Thamatica his way in. The Canticles of Devotion, perfected by the Iron Fathers of Medusa, had it yoked for now, but like a wild grox, it sought to buck him and trample his bones.

It hated him, and he knew it would turn on him the first chance it got.

He felt the gunship scream, and angled spears of light blinked into being as strafing fire punched through the hull.

Thamatica felt the gunship start to pull itself apart as Wayland threw it into ever more desperate manoeuvres to keep them in the air and out of the line of fire. It wouldn't work.

The patched-up Storm Eagle was no match for a fully functional Thunderhawk.

Only a matter of seconds remained to them.

Thamatica drove deep into the mindspace of the splicer, casting his net wide across the local area. It took him barely a fraction of a second to find

the bellicose spirit of the Thunderhawk, an interloper just like them.

In the noospheric volume, it was an angry red dart, a bloody knife aimed at their heart.

'You see it?' he said, his words echoing within their shared mindspace.

The splicer growled, a predator on a fraying leash.

It growled in a strange machine cant. Its words were unknown, but the meaning was clear.

First this, then you.

Thamatica turned the splicer loose.

He watched its consciousness unwind like a twisting double helix of data, beautiful in a way the noospheric renditions of Martian code never were. It closed the virtual distance to the Thunderhawk in the blink of an eye and immediately enmeshed itself in the brutal consciousness of its machine-spirit.

Thamatica felt a momentary pang of regret as he watched the icy claws of the splicer tear into the Thunderhawk's spirit, tendrils of its cold consciousness burrowing into every facet of the gunship's being and co-opting them one by one.

The red dart of the Sons of Horus craft wobbled in the air as us pilot fought the rebellion fomenting deep in its systems. Seeing the total devastation being wrought within. Thamatica knew the enemy pilot had no chance whatsoever.

The Thunderhawk abruptly nosed over, rolling and diving straight into the ground.

Thamatica saw the dissolution of its machine-spirit and offered a prayer to the Omnissiah to forgive him for its murder.

The splicer arced away from its kill, and even though he knew it was hopeless, Thamatica fought to disengage himself from shared mindspace.

It raced towards him, the predator unleashed.

Now you.

* * *

Wayland guided the Storm Eagle into the *Sisypheum's* forward embarkation deck and quickly spooled the engines down. The full weight of the gunship strained its broken frame, and Wayland gritted his teeth as

the strike cruiser's gravity pulled it apart.

He tried to rise from the pilot's seat, but his legs wouldn't work.

Only now did Wayland dare to look down.

The strafing shots that had blown out the canopy and smashed the threat board had punched through his lower back and shattered the base of his spinal column. He'd felt the pain, but so mingled were his and the gunship's sensations that he had not been able to differentiate between the two.

He felt a presence at his shoulder, but couldn't turn in the seat.

'Thamatica?'

'No,' wheezed Sharrowkyn through a sucking chest wound. 'He's gone.'

'Gone? How?'

'I don't know,' said Sharrowkyn. 'The machine he's linked to did something to him. Neural feedback or psycho-shock. Whatever it did, he didn't survive it.'

Wayland nodded and said, 'Help me up, my lower half isn't working too well now.'

Though he could barely stand, Sharrowkyn bent to lift him from the pilot's seat. Wayland's body was a dead weight, and he kept his arm wrapped around his friend's shoulders. Together, they struggled back into the troop compartment, where Garuda sat on Thamatica's shoulder. The Iron Father sat rigid in his grav-seat, a pale winter's light seething just below his skin and pulsing beneath his sightless eyes.

Wayland knew instantly what had happened.

'He saved us. He loosed the splicer to bring down the Thunderhawk, knowing it would turn on him.'

Sharrowkyn said nothing, but nodded in respect to the fallen Iron Father as they staggered from the gunship's interior.

'Get me to the bridge and plug me into the command module,' said Wayland. 'We have a little under fifteen minutes before the *Sisypheum* smashes into the surface.'

'And then what?'

'Then we get out of here,' said Wayland. 'And we find somewhere to hide.'

'Where? Amid all this, where?'

Wayland smiled through the pain and said, 'Somewhere lost in the darkness.'

It took them another twelve minutes to reach the bridge in a series of stumbling falls. Garuda flew alongside them, clattering against the ship's internal structure as it flew an irregular, weaving path ahead of them.

At a lateral transit, they requisitioned a maintenance servitor to help carry Wayland, and Sharrowkyn was able to concentrate on not passing out. Both warriors were at the end of their endurance, and by the time Sharrowkyn and the servitor hoisted Wayland into the pilot's command throne, he was breathless with exertion and blood loss.

Under Wayland's instructions, he plugged the Iron Father into the navigation cogitator and fired up the preset launch protocols. Knowing their escape might need to be executed at a moment's notice. Wayland had left the reactor ticking over and slaved the drive activations to an embedded macro he could control without the need of a bridge crew.

Within moments, the *Sisypheum* had cast off its tethers and mag-clamps and was under thrust. Sharrowkyn watched through the viewing bay as the remains of the launch facility tumbled away. His eyelids were getting heavy, and when he looked up again, it had slammed down into the pale dust at the edge of the Mare Cognitum.

How long had he been unconscious?

Gradually, the curve of the moon fell away, and the spectral glow of its surface was replaced with the inky blackness of space. Far above, mighty warships flew in diamond shoals, each a gleaming cathedral that could destroy them with ease.

Sharrowkyn's breathing slowed, and he rested his palm on the surface of the Magna Maters case. His blood was still sticky, and he hoped that whatever lay within was worth the lives that had been lost to secure it. He felt his grip on consciousness fading.

Beside him, Garuda cawed as it stretched out one of its wings. As Sharrowkyn watched, the metal seemed to unfold and undo a measure of its damage, as though the bird were somehow repairing itself.

'You couldn't teach me the trick of that, could you?' he asked. The bird cocked its head to the side as if deciding whether or not to answer.

Sharrowkyn put thoughts of the bird from his mind and looked back at Wayland. For a moment, he thought his friend was dead, but then saw the darting movements beneath his eyelids. He was one with the ship, conjoined with its soul and linked to its every system. The *Sisypheum's*

wounds were great, and where before Wayland had borne and healed its hurts, now it carried his.

Sharrowkyn blinked as a sound intruded on his fugue state.

Proximity alarms.

A fresh pane had opened in the viewing bay, and Sharrowkyn saw a knife-blade vessel of black and gold lifting from below like a deep-ocean predator rising to feed.

'The *Cthonian Scion,'* he said, turning to Wayland, but if the Iron Father heard him, he gave no sign. The Sons of Horus destroyer flew on a direct vector towards them, clearly aware of exactly where they were.

Downing a pursuing Thunderhawk was one thing, but a Space Marine destroyer... ?

Blossoms of fire winked to life at the vessel's prow.

'Torpedoes in the void,' said Wayland tonelessly. 'Impact in eighty-five seconds.'

Sharrowkyn watched the approaching ship-killers, knowing there absolutely nothing they could do to evade them. The *Sisypheum* was too badly damaged for evasive manoeuvres, and even with Wayland's control macros in place, it simply wasn't possible to fight a void engagement without a crew.

'Sixty seconds,' said Wayland, his voice sounding distant and lost.

A chrono-timer spiralled downwards in the corner of the viewing bay, marking the last moments of their lives.

The proximity alarms were shrieking louder than before, as if warning them they were about to slam into a mountain.

Sharrowkyn pushed himself upright with a grunt of pain. The effort was almost too much for him, but he was damned if he would meet his death on his backside.

'Forty seconds.'

A shadow fell across the viewing bay and, for a brief moment, Sharrowkyn wondered if this was some reaction of the Sisypheum to its imminent destruction, dimming its sight to spare them witnessing their death.

Then he saw it was no act of mercy on behalf of the strike cruiser and nor were the proximity alarms in response to the approach of the *Cthonian Scion*.

The shadow became the ornamented ventral plates of a manic warship, its gilded surface and vast sheets of armour dearly visible in exquisite detail. Its hull was golden and cerulean, with towering vanes jutting from its kilometres-long length. Its gravity wake shook the *Sisypheum* with its nearness, and every time - a thought the vessel was soon to finish passing over them, yet more crenellated elements of structure were revealed, each enamelled and patterned with swirling geometric patterns and arcane symbolism.

'That's no ship of the line,' said Wayland, his eyes fluttering open in awe. 'That's a Gloriana...'

Yet more of the ship hove into view, and Sharrowkyn saw markings emblazoned on the forest of silver towers that trailed strange etheric energies. At the centre of the argent spines at its rear sat a vast crystalline pyramid, a sanctum and command bridge all in one.

'That's the *Photep,'* said Wayland. 'That's the flagship of the Crimson King.'

Its size was impossible to comprehend, so huge it defied the idea that it had been wrought by mortal hands and not willed into being by some inhuman deity. Sharrowkyn felt cold fire settle in his belly at the sight of the vast capital ship.

A memory surfaced. Wounded and alone on Eirene Septimus, facing Alpharius himself. The primarch of the Alpha Legion could have killed him without breaking sweat, but he had spared him. He had addressed Sharrowkyn by name, as if they were old friends instead of mortal enemies.

Sharrowkyn remembered the words that had passed between them as if they were carved into the forefront of his brain.

'*You're not going to fight me?*'

'*As much as I want to, I'm not going to kill you, Nykona. At least, not today,' said Alpharius. 'Magnus asked me not to.*'

When Cadmus Tyro had asked what that meant, Sharrowkyn had dismissed the primarch's words as manipulation and lies, but now here was the flagship of Magnus the Cyclops interposing itself between the *Sisypheum* and a killing barrage of torpedoes.

The countdown on the viewscreen blinked at zero.

But for the Crimson King sailing his vessel between the *Sisypheum* and

the torpedoes, they would already be dead.

'Why?' he demanded of the glittering pyramid at the heart of the *Photep*. 'Why?'

No answer was forthcoming, and a strange lethargy drew itself about Sharrowkyn as his body's healing mechanisms dragged him down into darkness.

He dreamed of glittering caves, a great golden light and an army of newborn giants who marched from that light into a war that never ended.

Sharrowkyn woke with Wayland's hand upon his shoulder. A moment of weightlessness filled him as he drifted up from his dreams of light and shadow. A fleeting moment before the bone-deep agonies of his wounds returned.

He groaned in pain and remembrance.

'We're here,' said Wayland. 'It's time to go.'

Pain and disorientation slowed Sharrowkyn's thought processes as he rose from the embrace of the sus-an membrane. He swallowed away a dryness in his throat and wiped the back of his red-stained hand across his eyes.

'Go? Go where? How long was I out?'

'Ten days,' said Wayland. 'The return journey took a little longer than our descent.'

Confusion was making it hard for Sharrowkyn to understand Wayland's words.

'Journey? Wayland, where are we?'

'I don't think it has a name,' said Wayland, and Sharrowkyn looked over at the viewing bay, seeing the black, slab-like form of the coaling station where they had repaired the *Sisypheum* prior to making their descent to Luna.

'You have to go,' said Wayland, and Sharrowkyn nodded, still not fully understanding the context of his friend's words.

'I don't think I can carry you,' said Sharrowkyn.

'That's all right, my friend,' said Wayland. 'You don't have to.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that you have to go on without me. This is the end of our path together.'

'No, I'll get that servitor,' protested Sharrowkyn, but he could it was

hopeless.

Wayland's body was past the point where any Apothecary could restore him or tech-priest rebuild him. His gaunt and ravaged features told a story of the internal anatomical cannibalism that had been required just to keep him alive this long.

'You need to take the Magna Mater off the *Sisypheum*,' said Wayland. 'The duty of Ta'lab Vita-37 now falls to you.'

'I can't,' said Sharrowkyn.

'You must,' said Wayland, and the desperation in his voice was taking the last of his strength to impart. 'Despite the intervention of the *Photep*, we did not leave the Solar System without hunters on our heels. I have evaded them for now, but they are almost upon us, and they must not find you and the Magna Mater aboard.'

'Where will you go?'

The Iron Father smiled, and a flash of the old Wayland was restored. The *Sisypheum* and I will lead them a merry dance way out beyond the Halo Stars, into the trans-galactic wastes,' said Wayland with a hoarse chuckle. 'By the time they catch us, I'll be long dead and they will never find you.'

Sharrowkyn shook his head. 'No, let me carry you. Set the ship on its course and be done with it.'

'She won't make it far enough without a pilot at the helm,' said Wayland. 'It has to be this way. Now go, my friend.'

Sharrowkyn saw the determination in his friend's face, and knew he would not be dissuaded from this course. Besides, he was right.

With a heavy heart, Sharrowkyn lifted the Magna Mater and backed away from the command console.

'It was an honour to know you, Sabik Wayland,' he said.

'The honour was mine,' replied Wayland.

The nameless coaling station was just as dark as Sharrowkyn remembered it.

The *Sisypheum* and Wayland were long gone, sailing into the darkness between the stars.

Sharrowkyn was used to working in solitude, had embraced it, actively rejecting the company of others, but now, alone at the edge of wilderness space, he suddenly craved the company of his brothers.

He wasn't entirely alone. Garuda accompanied him, flying overhead in the wide open spaces of the coaling station. The bird looked new, like the first time Sharrowkyn had seen it, its wings resplendent and its feathers as crisply wrought as if fresh from the artisan's bench.

His transhuman physiology could sustain him in a form of hibernation for centuries, but he suspected whatever span he might reach here would be much reduced. The scabbed floors and scraps of atmosphere that clung to the walls of the cavernous chambers still reeked of unrefined promethium.

The black welcomed Sharrowkyn. It folded around him like an old friend welcoming a fellow traveller in darkness.

Sharrowkyn knew exactly where he would wait out the ages to come.

.

He and Garuda followed a path he had walked many times while the Iron Hands repaired the *Sisypheum*. It led unerringly to a chamber near the heart of the coaling station, its walls engraved with names of beloved vessels and fallen shipmates.

He saw now that he had underestimated the sheer number etchings.

Hundreds of thousands of names and deeds.

Men and women whose names had been forgotten, heroes all.

Their courage had gone unrecorded, save for these walls.

Their stories had never been told.

Sharrowkyn slumped with his back to the wall, his breathing slowing and his heart rate dropping as the mechanisms of the sus-an membrane tugged at his consciousness again.

No. Not yet. He still had work to do before then.

How best should a warrior die?

Sharrowkyn had given much thought to this over the years.

His neophyte thoughts of war-torn battlefields and glory were the dreams of folly.

This was as fitting a resting place for a warrior of the Raven Guard as he could imagine.

He drew his gladius and swept his fingertips over the wall, feeling the roughness where knives and chisels had scored it.

Finally he found a place to make his mark.

Sharrowkyn cut with swift, economical strokes, carving the names of the warriors who had crewed the *Sisypheum* next to the long-dead pioneers of

the Imperium.

He cut his own name last, and with his task complete, set down his blade.

His body was ruined, unable to heal while he still drew waking breath.

Centuries might pass before he woke, if he woke at all, and the thought did not trouble him overmuch. He hoped some stranger in a far-distant age might find their names and wonder who they were, what kind of men they had been, and through that connection be joined to the deeds of those who had gone before.

Sharrowkyn rested his hand on the Magna Mater as Garuda flew down to settle upon his shoulder. He barely felt its weight. Its claws dug into the ceramite of his armour and he doubted he could prise it loose even if he wanted to.

The bird lifted its head and spread its wings wide.

It froze in place, a silent watcher and sentinel all in one.

His eyes drifted downwards, and Sharrowkyn wished he knew the name of this place. It felt wrong to let the darkness claim him with out knowing where he lay.

As if in answer to that thought, his drifting gaze found a carving made in the lee of the archway leading into the chamber. Half obscured by striated oil patterns and creeping rust but still legible.

A nameplate, perhaps from a lost starship or a forgotten battle.

Sharrowkyn supposed it didn't matter.

It would serve.

Sangprimus Portum.

AFTERWORD

So ends the journey of the *Sisypheum* and her brave crew.

In truth, her final fate and that of her Shattered Legion warriors was never likely to end well, at least in terms of them walking away unscathed from fighting behind the lines of the Warmaster's advance on Terra. In my mind, it was always going to be an arc that could only end one way.

But Sabik Wayland and Nykona Sharrowkyn...? Ah, yes, I had plans for them, heroic destinies upon the nightmare battlefields to come on Terra, desperate secret missions against the odds fought in the shadows of the greatest war imaginable. These were characters I'd become deeply attached to over the course of their adventures to capture the Kryptos, to pursue Fulgrim and Perturabo into the Eye of Terror, and latterly, to face Alpharius on Eirene Septimus. These were warriors whose fates could buck the odds and defy destiny.

At least that's what I told myself going into this book.

Sons of the Selenar was to be a classic, men-on-a-mission novel in the mould of Alistair MacLean's *The Guns of Navarone* or Where Eagles Dare (though to be fair, that latter movie had already served as a thematic inspiration for *Dead Sky, Black Sun*). The heroes were to be faced with an almost impossible mission requiring stealth, cunning and an indomitable spirit to succeed. It would be a nail-biting thrill ride that would demand sacrifice, determination and courage above and beyond the call of duty. But it would, ultimately, see our heroes earn their thrilling escape from danger to a feel-good, air-punching denouement as they piloted the battered yet defiant *Sisypheum* down through Terra's atmosphere to be reunited with their loyalist brothers.

But the more words I wrote and the more the novella's theme *of doing what needs to be done, no matter the personal cost* became ever more explicit as the writing went on, the more I realised that sometimes destiny

gets the last laugh after all. As the book crested the midway point and the body count rose with every subsequent chapter, I realised it would cheapen those sacrifices if Wayland and Sharrowkyn walked away scot-free thanks to some personal plot armour I'd wrapped around them.

Every turn of the screw in this novel drove the characters towards its brutal ending, and as it became ever more apparent that that was what was happening, the more it felt right... the more it felt like it was the only conclusion possible. That's not to say it was easy or that I didn't try to fight where I could see the ending was heading.

I kept looking for ways to steer the story towards a happy ending, or at least as much of a happy ending as Black Library books ever get. The synopsis for *Sons of the Selenar* said one thing, with heroic derring-do and a great many of its heroes coming home for tea and medals, but, as is often the way, the characters and the story had decided upon another. That's not unusual in my writing process: best ideas often pop up along the way during the writing of a book, what, initially think is a cool direction for the story to go when I haven't written a word of it often ends up skewing wildly when the pen hits the paper.

As the crew of the *Sisypheum* delved deeper into the mysterious bedrock of Luna, I got the sense that this was a mission that wouldn't (and shouldn't) be completed without dire consequences. But that threw up problems of its own. It meant I needed to figure out how to pay off some threads I'd set up earlier in *The Seventh Serpent*, particularly in regard to a line delivered by Alpharius to Sharrowkyn concerning a certain cyclopean sorcerer. I had many long and detailed conversations with Nick Kyme about this, and the results of those played a huge part in my deliberations over the direction and plot to my follow-up Siege of Terra project. I haven't forgotten that line of Alpharius in *The Seventh Serpent*, and what it meant will stand as a testament to the Crimson King's mindset at this point in the Horus Heresy.

Another thing that came out of these discussions was the under standing that the end result of *Sons of the Selenar* needed to have weight and consequence, or else what was the point of the crew's sacrifice? For this to be their swansong, the crew of the *Sisypheum* had to have a victory of sorts or else readers would close the book and feel it had been pointless to have shared the journey with these characters all the way from Isstvan V. The

driver of the plot had always been the Magna Mater, but, like most McGuffins, I'd originally intended for it to - metaphorically - end up locked away in a warehouse to be studied by 'top men'. But with the book's ending shaping up to be in the vein of *Blake's 7's* final episode, that clearly wasn't enough. And from that came the name of the 'nameless' coaling station that offers a temporary respite for the *Sisypheum*'s crew to repair their ship and, in the end, lay their weary heads down. It's a name that has no significance in this time and place, but which will, many thousands of years later (with the rise of a primarch who has yet to meet his fate) herald a rebirth of the Adeptus Astartes in their bigger, faster, tougher incarnations. The ending to *Sons of the Selenar* wasn't the one I planned at its beginning, but it's one I feel better captures the spirit of courage and tragedy of the Horus Heresy books that came before it and nicely sets up the tone of the books yet to come in the Siege of Terra.

So... the curtain has fallen.

Make the sign of the Opus Machina to say farewell to the proud *Sisypheum* as she sails alone through the void with the mortally wounded Sabik Wayland at her helm.

Keep to the shadows as you make the sign of the aquila to honour the dying form of Nykona Sharrowkyn in the cold darkness.

It's how they would want to be remembered.

Graham McNeill
Los Angeles, 2019

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written many Horus Heresy novels, including *The Crimson King*, *Vengeful Spirit* and his New York Times bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written the Forges of Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Warhammer Horror novella *The Colonel's Monograph*. For Warhammer, he has written the Warhammer Chronicles trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

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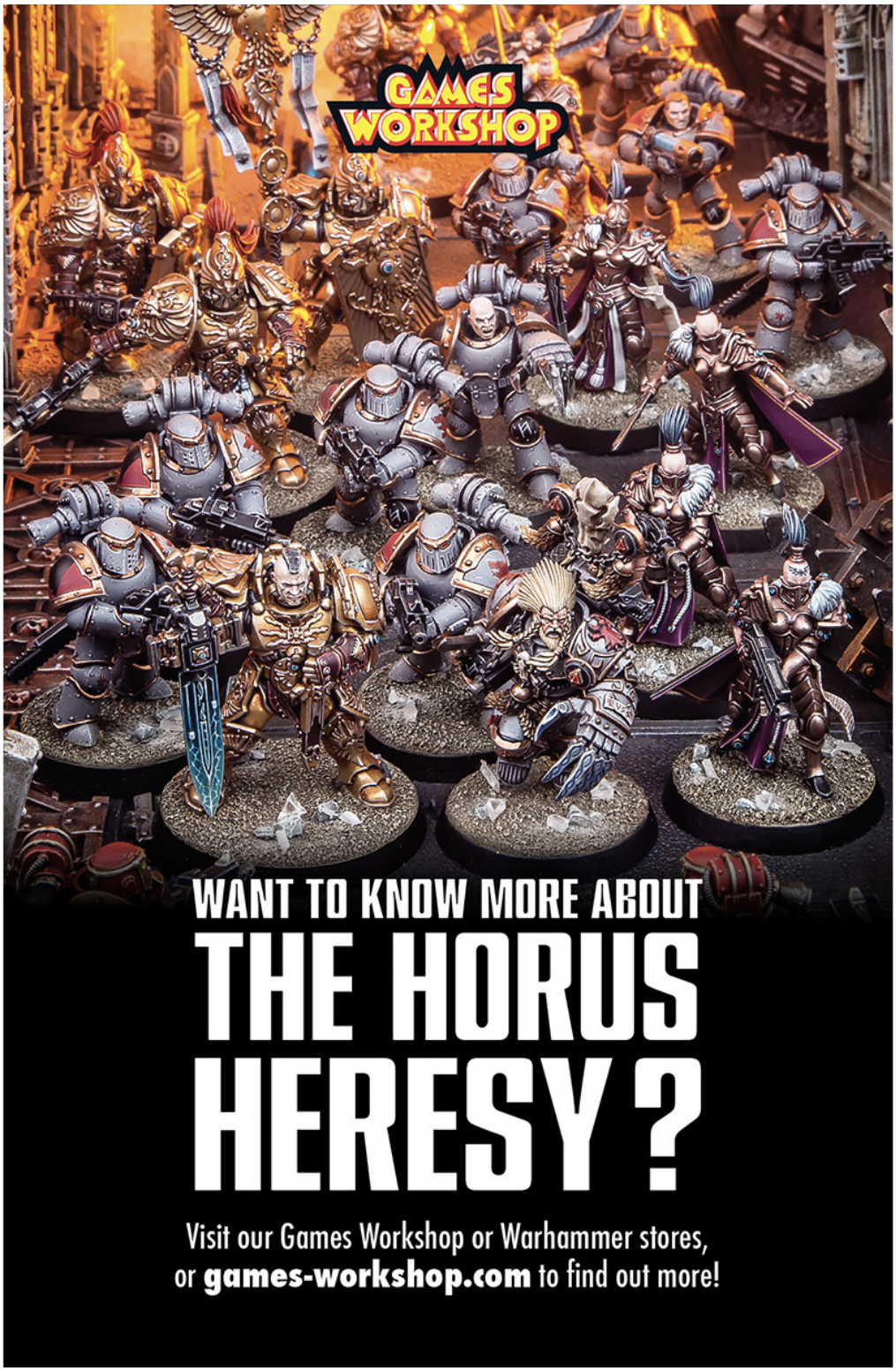
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To my fellow Sons of the Selenar who've told this story so far, and in whose company we'll bring it home.

And for Amber, my warrior-princess of the moon and wolves.

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